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Starring
GENE BARRY

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- **The killer would not escape Burke's Law.**

- "Looks like the old goat's coming to," Ed Samlow said when I walked in.

- "Wait outside," I said. "If you hear screaming, come in and tear me off him."

- Ed looked at me, startled, and no wonder: It was the first time he or anybody else had heard me hate a killer out loud.

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WHO
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MADCAP
MILLICENT
?

Roger Fuller

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Who Killed Madcap Millicent?

Chapter One

I.

I looked down at the body of the girl on the floor, the woman whose bright-blond hair Death seemed to dull with each passing moment, and remembered the last time I'd seen her. She'd been laughing at me over her Yorkshire terrier's topknot, just having told me that I was about to have my head chopped off.

George McLeod asked, "You know who she is, don't you, Captain?"

I nodded. "It's Millicent Richards, isn't it? I used to be able to tell them apart at first glance, but it's been a long time. Besides, there's that damned blue suffusion."

"It's Millicent," he said.

I raised my eyes from the body and Tim Tilson covered Millicent with the blanket again. I looked across the shabby, messed-up beach shack at the young man who sat in a chair near the windows, his hands clasped tight between his bare knees, his eyes on his white knuckles. A handsome Joe, this beach bum, even under the present circumstances, which were not good for him.

"Gil Harris," Tilson informed me before I asked. "He called the precinct and said there'd been an accident. The boys in the car that answered the call called us."

I walked over to Harris. "What happened?" I asked him.

He shrugged wide shoulders that were the color of good cherry-wood paneling. "I don't know," he told me. "I swear to God I don't know what happened. Somebody tell me."

"Think real hard," I suggested. "Start at the beginning. You and Millicent were having a bash and what happened? Were you two joyriding and she gave herself a jam by mistake, maybe?"

His eyes came up in a startled headjerk—dark-brown eyes that seemed honestly puzzled. "I don't get you," he said. "Gave herself a jam?" Understanding came quickly and his nose wrinkled. "Hey, no, man!" he exclaimed. "She never went for that stuff any more than I did. That's for creeps. You know that."

"I know it and you say you know it, but did Millicent Richards?" I asked. "From what I've heard—"

"I don't give a damn what you heard," he flared. "She didn't touch the stuff. Maybe she lushed it up but not the other. Never."

I was willing to buy it, at least for the time being. "OK," I said, "suppose you tell me what happened. The straight story."

"I already told these other guys all about it."

"I know," I said, "but one more time for me. When did this little party start—last night?"

He looked down at his hands again and shook his head slowly, reluctantly. "No; she—she came down here Thursday along about sundown. She was bugged at something that happened at home. She said she had to get away from there before she—well, she said if she hung around there one minute more she'd blow her stack and do something she might be sorry for, so she came down here to get away." He unclasped his hands and started looking around the room as though hunting something.

"Cigarette?" I asked.

He shook his nearly shaven head. "I don't smoke," he told me. "I'm looking for my protein pills. I'm hungry and I don't suppose you guys would wait till I fry myself an egg or something."

"You suppose right," I told him. "Tim, can you find the gentleman's protein pills for him?"

"Right here," Tilson said. "I thought the lab boys ought to give them a look."

Harris sneered at my bright young man. "You think I poisoned her, for crissake?" he asked. "Why would I do that? You think I'm in her will, maybe?"

"You tell us," I suggested. I took the bottle of pills from Tim and spilled a couple into my palm, sniffed them. They had plenty of B_1 in them, all right. When I put my tongue to one of them it had a chocolate-malt taste. Gil Harris didn't look like the type who'd do the commit with last-ditch cyanide kept conveniently in a protein-pill bottle, so I handed them over to him. He took a handful, crunching them between his strong white teeth. I told myself that if the manufacturer needed a live-model endorsement they could do worse than put Harris' picture in their ads—after they made him change that scarlet jockstrap of a swimsuit and get into something a little more concealing. Harris had all the muscles and a handsome puss, too. No brains, maybe, but with the rest of his equipment, why would he need brains?

When he got through munching, I nudged him. "So Millicent came down here Thursday evening. Saturday noon she turns up dead. What happened in between?"

Another shrug. "We did this and that," he said vaguely. "She had a case of booze in the car with her and she got smashed right off. I don't drink so she had it all to herself. When she wasn't too blasted, we swam and went out on the boards and—and talked and passed the time. You know."

Uh-huh, I knew. All her adolescent and adult life, since she was about thirteen or fourteen, Millicent had been talking and passing the time with this man and that. Nor had all the strict, expensive schools her Aunt Harriet had shut her up in, nor all the psychiatrists who'd tried to dig out the worm of her compulsions, been able to slow her up one bit.

"So this morning early, about five-thirty, I—well, I was knocked out," Gil Harris was saying. "You know, fun's fun but a guy's got to get his rest once in a while. So I told her I had to see this guy and I cut out. When I came back about eleven o'clock her car was still here and I said to myself, well, if I got to hurt her feelings to get her out of here, I got to."

His eyes came up to meet mine again, reflecting a strange embarrassment. "Look, Captain, I don't want to say anything against Millicent, she's dead, but that broad could—"

"OK," I cut in briskly. "So she was still here when you came back from seeing this man. What's this fellow's name, by the way?"

He didn't want to tell me but he was in a bad bind. "Millicent's brother-in-law, Nels Manning," he said. "Old Nels was about the only one who could do anything with Millicent when she was tying one on, so I went out there and got him out of bed and told him he had to get Millicent off my back. He said he'd see what he could do but give him a little while to get organized."

"Get organized?"

"Well, Nels is a ginhead and it takes him a little time to get synchronized in the morning," Harris explained.

"He's Millicent's brother-in-law? Meredith's husband?" I asked.

"No, Olivia's," the beach bum told me. "Her fifth or sixth, I don't know which. Maybe she don't, either, the way she keeps taking them on."

Poor Olivia, poor Millicent, poor all of us who had our lives twisted by dear Aunt Harriet.

"Nels Manning was going to get Millicent off your back, but she was still here when you came back here," I said.

"Yeah, and stoned, man. Like real falling-down drunk. I told her to haul it out of here before I got really teed off but—"

"You mean you'd let her drive in her condition?" Tim Tilson broke in.

The tanned shoulders lifted in a negligent shrug.

"She'd made it home before when she was worse than that. She drove crazy, drunk or sober. It didn't make much difference whether she had a load on or not."

Well, at least he didn't say Millicent was a better driver drunk than she was sober—the old, deadly boast. "Go ahead," I told Harris.

"Well, when I told her to get lost she said OK, OK, only after she'd taken the trouble to drive back to her house and get us a big picnic lunch, the least I could do was eat it with her, wasn't it? She promised that as soon as we finished this damn picnic lunch she'd blow and she'd never bother me again. She said something about never bothering *anybody* again."

"You didn't tell us that before," Les Hart put in quickly.

Another shrug. "It was just booze talking," Harris explained. "Every once in a while Millicent got on a nobody-loves-me kick when she was smashed. She'd be better off dead, that sort of crap. It didn't mean a thing."

Maybe not. But after a thousand mornings of waking up and facing the fact that she'd degraded herself again, wasn't it possible that even Millicent Richards might go down under her helpless despair?

"So I said OK, let's eat," Harris was saying. "I thought maybe if she got some food in her she'd sober up or maybe fall asleep and I could call Nels and tell him to come and collect her. But she said she had to have a martooni before she ate anything and I said to myself here we go again but she wouldn't listen about eating first. She poured a drink out of that Thermos over there and she started laughing it up big. She said something about big joke on me and this would fix everything. She drank the martini and then"—he shook his head slowly as he remembered the scene—"then she just curled over and made a little noise and fell down on the floor."

I walked across the stifling room to the table against the wall where sat the picnic hamper with the tall vacuum bottle beside it. I leaned over to smell the stopper, and the odor of almonds was strong. Millicent either had been too drunk to notice the warning of cyanide or that martini had been her farewell toast, deliberately swallowed.

"I thought she'd passed out," the beach boy said, "but when I started to get her up off the floor onto the bed in there, I saw the blue face and, Jesus, I knew then, all right."

His face went down to his hands suddenly, surprisingly, and he moaned. "It was awful," he said, his voice muffled. "One second she was standing there, a pest but a—a sweet kid, and the next second she was dead." He looked up at me almost defiantly. "She *was* a sweet kid, Captain," he told me. "I don't care what they say, she was no tramp. Maybe she—but—hell, I don't know."

A lot of people tried to find out about Millicent, son, I said silently, *and they don't know, either.*

"Tell the captain the rest of the story," Les said. "Then explain about those cameras again."

I looked around the shack and saw three cameras on wall brackets, exposed now but with every indication that my men had torn aside the shabby drapes that had covered them.

"I keep telling you I'm a photographer," Gil Harris said. "I got my credentials in the other room if you'll just let me get them."

"Later," George said. "So when Millicent fell down dead what happened? Tell the captain."

The tanned young man said, "I got no phone in the pad, so as soon as I knew she was dead I beat it for the little bar up the beach; that's the nearest place. I put in the call from the booth outside the saloon and then I came right back here and waited for the cops. I didn't touch her."

"How long were you gone when you phoned?" I asked.

"Well, I had to wait at the outdoor booth because there was a broad yakking it up and I didn't want to use the phone in the bar because that gang would've heard me and they'd be all over the place. I thought maybe—well, maybe I could keep it quiet, see? Anyway, when this broad got through talking and I phoned the cops and got back here, it must've been twenty minutes, maybe more."

He anticipated my next question and said, "Yeah, I know my car's out there and so's Millicent's, but mine's got a bum battery and Millicent's roadmaster—honest, I didn't think of it. I had to run both ways." He looked at the blanketed body on the floor and shook his head again. "Why would she want to do a thing like that in *my* pad?" he asked.

"We'll find out," Les Hart said. "You'd better be sure your story's straight, Harris, because we'll find out every little thing before we're through."

"I gave it to you like it happened," the beach bum-photographer protested. "Hell, I hang ten—I don't poison people."

"Hang ten?" I asked, and looked to my font of information, Detective Timothy Tilson, to explain.

"Surfboard language, Captain," Tim said promptly. "To hang ten is to keep all ten toes over the front end of the board. It takes an expert to do it."

"And I suppose you hang ten, too?" I asked.

"Now and then." He tried to say it modestly.

"My partner," Les Hart said heavily.

I nodded to George McLeod to take over, and began moving around the shack, examining those cameras, poking here and there. I listened as my lieutenant asked Harris, "Did you and Millicent Richards have a big thing going? Were you going to marry her?"

"Marry Millicent? She wasn't interested in marrying anybody, just playing around. The guy that married a sexpot like her would be—"

"OK," George broke in. "I asked you a question and all you had to say was yes or no. We don't need your opinions."

"Well, the answer is no. I was just another guy she lived it up with once in a while, that's all. She made all the dates, not me. She'd show up here and say let's swing and I either said OK or not tonight, Josephine. Either way, it was OK with Millicent. If I had another date or I didn't feel like it, she'd just find somebody else to play with."

"You don't want to change your story about the martinis, do you?" McLeod asked. "Or about those hidden cameras with the cable releases? What's your racket besides surfing, Harris—blackmail?"

"I keep telling you I'm a photographer. So I take some nude art for the stag magazines once in a while—you got any law against that?"

"No," George admitted, "but we do have a couple of laws that your lousy stag magazines keep tripping over. Maybe we can find one that'll fit you."

George kept on talking but I wasn't listening by that time. I was looking down at the cabinet photograph I'd found mixed in with a pile of glossies of various bare women sitting on sand dunes. The cabinet photo was of the woman I once thought was going to be Mrs. Amos Burke, the girl I considered the most beautiful of the famous Richards quadruplets, Olivia.

And it was inscribed in the back-slanting handwriting I couldn't mistake: *To Gil darling, with all my love —after my fashion.*

2.

Once upon a time there were four beautiful princesses who were held prisoner by a wicked witch—and my fairy story breaks down right there. The Richards quadruplets were not actually princesses even though their grandfather's lumber-shipping-and-land fortune enabled them to live like storybook royalty and Aunt Harriet Richards was not really a wicked witch. Everything she did was doubtless according to her idea of what was best for her four wards, Olivia, Millicent, Meredith and Jane.

The quads were left orphans when they were ten years old. Their father, E. Jarvis Richards III, and their mother, Katherine, from whom they got their beauty if the oil painting in the hallway of Cedar Hill was to be believed, died together in the wreck of their yacht off Kodiak Island, Alaska, where Jarvis had gone to hunt bear. That was in the summer of 1941 and I was thirteen at the time.

I met the quads at their four-cornered debut, high spot of a social season that occurred between my graduation from Amherst and my hitch in Korea. At that time it wasn't generally known that F. X. Burke's only son was going on the cops and so I was included in the guest list drawn up by the quads' guardian, that old dragon, Miss Harriet Richards. Why I attended this particular affair is still a mystery (later I ascribed it to fate and still later to downright lousy luck) but I was there when the Richards sisters made their bow and I had only to take one look at Olivia Richards to turn into a limp blob of helpless adoration.

The first time I mentioned this state of affairs to a friend she asked me a question that I got heartily sick of hearing before the roof finally fell in and the whole thing was over: "How can a man fall in love with one identical quadruplet and not with the other three?"

In the first place, the Richards sisters were not identical, at least not to me. They were all beautiful but in my eyes Olivia was way out in front of the other three. After I got to know them I found their personalities were as different as four unrelated strangers' in many ways. Olivia, of course, was the perfect one—serene, kind, gracious, desirable and wise. Those masters of the cliché, society editors, invariably called Millicent the madcap sister, and as much as I despised the adjective, it suited her: she was a rebel from the cradle, always being rescued from one scrape to promptly get into another one, usually worse. Meredith was the brain, intelligent, inquisitive, studious, while Jane, although she had her share of looks and figure, was the misfit. Jane was quiet, mousy, acid-tongued and offbeat; Olivia told me that from the time she learned to read, Jane had always had her nose in esoteric books that were a far cry from *The Bobbsey Twins* or *Nancy Drew.*

"If Jane had a little of Millicent in her makeup and if Millicent had a lot of Jane in hers, Aunt Harriet would be able to sleep better," Olivia told me. "I know I shouldn't be an old woman about it, because they're great big girls now, entitled to live their own lives, but I worry about Jane—and Millicent, of course. Those two have always missed a father's direction more than Meredith or I have."

"When we're married I'll try to fill in as an ersatz papa," I offered.

"Over my dead body." She laughed. "I've always had to share everything with my sisters but I don't intend to share you, not even in the role of ersatz papa. You're going to be all mine, Amos me boy—and besides, if I have anything to do with it, you'll be playing papa for real before you've had time to brush the confetti out of your hair."

"Why, Olivia Richards, how you talk," I said. "I hope you're not suggesting that we—"

"No, I'm not, you big ape," she broke in. "You'll just have to sit there and grit your teeth till we're married, all right and proper." And then, a while later, "Oh, Amos, the waiting's as hard for me as it is for you!"

"So let's get in the car and go somewhere and get married tonight," I suggested again, and again she said no, it would break Aunt Harriet's heart. The old gal, you see, was set on a wedding that would make any other that had ever taken place in our town seem, by comparison, like a midnight elopement-hitching in a JP's parlor.

Looking back on it, I still don't see how I didn't at least have a faint suspicion that Aunt Harriet might lower the boom on me. I knew she wished that Olivia had picked out somebody with a little bluer-blooded background than mine. Miss Harriet Richards was hell on social standing, and whereas my old man, F. X. Burke, had the friendship and admiration of men in high social circles as well as in government and business, our family was neither Blue Book nor D.A.R. My grandfather was a rough-tough immigrant from County Mayo and my father didn't start to make it big in highways and industrial construction until he was pretty well along. Now we were loaded and we knew which fork to use, but nobody could ever accuse the Burkes, *père ou fils,* of giving much of a damn about society for society's sake.

I'll never know why Aunt Harriet kept quiet so long about my deficiencies as a prospective husband for one of her precious nieces, but she did. Olivia and I made our ecstatic plans (and never mind about the trouble in Korea; it was on the other side of the world and it couldn't possibly affect us) and it came time for our engagement to be formally announced. Things couldn't have looked better.

And then, on the eighteenth of April, 1950, Aunt Harriet summoned me to Cedar Hill, the charming, rambling Richards estate, on a matter which her secretary described as "of extreme urgency."

"Is Olivia all right?" was my reaction.

"Yes, Miss Olivia's in perfect health," the secretary said primly. "Miss Richards asks that you don't inform Miss Olivia about this—er—visit for the time being, Mr. Burke."

"A surprise, huh?" I asked, idiotically. Well, I'd always heard that brides-to-be had a lot of showers and such folderal put on them by their friends and relatives and how was I to know that Aunt Harriet wasn't one to go the surprise-party route, too, Old Ironsides though she might be?

"You might call it that," the secretary said. "She expects you for tea at three-forty-five."

I knew Miss Harriet Richards well enough not to get there at three-forty-six and I also knew that when Aunt Harriet said tea she meant tea, not cocktails, sherry or even coffee. I'd sat through one or two of her teas before and they'd been pretty grim (I never was what you'd call a compulsive watercress-and-cucumber-sandwich eater), but I drove up to the Richards place at three-thirty with a smile on my face and my heart high; for my beloved Olivia I'd sit through tea with Aunt Harriet every day of my life and twice on national holidays.

When I parked my car and went up the front steps onto the long, shaded veranda, there was Millicent in one of the deep chairs, her legs crossed two-look high, as always, and her pet Yorkie in her lap, peering at me out of its bright-button eyes.

"Hi, Amos," she called. "How come you're riding in a convertible instead of a tumbrel?"

"Tumbrel? You mean like on the way to the guillotine?"

"Uh-huh." She busied herself with the little blue bow in the Yorkie's topknot. "Did you think Aunt Harriet invited you over to look at her stereopticon slides?" Before I could say anything to that, she asked, "Got a cigarette? I left mine somewhere."

I gave her my pack and asked, "What's this about tumbrels and guillotines, Millicent?"

She took my lighter and looked up at me over the flame, her eyes quizzical. When she had her cigarette going, she said, "I may be wrong and I sorta hope I am, even though I positively despise that oh-so-superior sister of mine, but I think you're about to get your head chopped off, dear boy."

"By Aunt Harriet?" I asked. "Are you kidding, I hope?"

"Nope. I happened to be in the hall outside Aunt Harriet's rooms when her secretary read her mail to her—OK, so I was listening at the keyhole to see if some fink had squealed on me about something—and there was a letter about Mr. Amos Burke that made Aunt Harriet positively scream." She squinted up at me through the blue-gray smoke. "Are you really going to be a cop when you grow up, Amos?"

"Uh-huh," I said. "I've got my application in at the Police Academy. They're just waiting to see what's with my Army service if this Korean thing really amounts to anything."

"And Olivia knows all about this?" she asked.

"Why, of course she does," I said stoutly. (Later I found out that we'd had so many other things to talk about that I'd either skimped discussing my plans for a career or Olivia had considered my talk about becoming a law-enforcement officer so much police-buff prattle, but at the time I honestly thought she knew my intentions.) "What's this all about, anyway?"

She uncrossed her lovely legs recklessly and came out of the chair with the Yorkie in her arms. "Are you that dumb that you thought Aunt Harriet would stand still for Olivia marrying a *cop?*" she asked me. "Olivia's always been her favorite; she thinks the moon rises and sets in her left ear. So march upstairs, m'lad, and tell Aunt Harriet that whatever your anonymous friend wrote about you going to be a cop was a big fat lie. Tell her you're going to be one of the idle rich, of course, like any sensible person."

She started down the steps, smiling at me over her shoulder. "And lay it on thick, Amos," she told me. "Y'see, I've decided it would be fun to have a great big gorgeous hunk of stuff like you in the family. Who knows—we might even fix up some kind of *ménage à cinq*. We girls could draw straws or hang a lottery wheel outside your bedroom door or—" She laughed at my expression and went off toward the swimming pool.

I tried to tell myself that Millicent was just being Millicent: she got no bigger kick than by shocking, scaring or scrambling people with a couple of ill-chosen words. But when I went to the front door and rang the bell to bring the butler, Huston, I'd lost the smile on my face and my heart was joggling around somewhere near the belt line.

Aunt Harriet didn't waste any time in proving that Millicent hadn't just been being Millicent. The old girl sat in a wing chair with her back to the high windows so that I had to squint into the light, and her voice had all the rich timbre of two slab slates being slapped together.

"Mr. Burke," she told me, "I received an anonymous letter this morning and while I usually treat such things as they deserve by ignoring them, this one concerned the welfare of my niece Olivia. Therefore, I didn't feel I could dismiss it without giving you an opportunity to refute the charges contained in this abominable note."

She talked that way, did dear Aunt Harriet. She was the late Jarvis Richards' older sister and I'd heard that even when Jarvis and the quads' mother were alive Harriet Richards had ruled the household with an iron hand. She was close to seventy when this happened, and a remarkable, handsome woman in an ultra-patrician way, but colder than a pawnbroker's heart. Olivia had mentioned something about her aunt having once loved a man who'd run out on her at the last minute, practically leaving her waiting at the church. This obviously had soured Aunt Harriet on life in general and men in particular; add to this the fact that she was the guardian of four lovely girls, each one of whom had more than seven million dollars in her own right, and it could be understood why Miss Harriet Richards kept a jaundiced eye out for fortune hunters.

That particular hurdle hadn't bothered me because F. X. had made an embarrassing amount of dough, but this police business was something else again. I was going into law enforcement; I'd set my sights on a police career when I was a fourteen-year-old kid and nothing—not my father's explosive objections (since stilled to an occasional mutter), nor the kidding I took from my friends and fraternity brothers, nor *la grande dame* to end all *grandes dames,* Miss Harriet Richards—was going to stop me.

"Perhaps if I knew what these abominable charges were I could do better in the refuting department," I stalled. "Could I please see the letter?"

"I prefer to tell you what it said," she sniffed. "Briefly, it accused you of planning to become a—a *policeman.* A *'cop'* was the common term the writer used, to be exact."

"Hardly a vile epithet, would you say, Miss Richards?" I asked. I was showing off, trying to match her Louisa M. Alcott language to prove that I was "eddiccated," too—I didn't *have* to speak in words of one syllable.

"Hardly a proper word to be associated with any man who seeks my niece's hand in marriage," the old gal countered. I saw the silhouette of her head bend forward and knew she was peering at me. "You haven't denied the charge, Mr. Burke. Am I to assume that you have no defense against this accusation? Do you have the temerity to stand there and admit you've deceived my Olivia this way, leading her to the point of throwing her life away on a common *policeman?"*

My temper was a little more volatile in those days than it is now and I did a burn that might have started slow but picked up speed in a hurry. "Now, just a minute," I said. "Since when has a law-enforcement officer been such a social leper? As for Olivia throwing her life away, why don't you ask her about that? It's her life, after all."

"And one I've been charged with protecting against such calamities," she said coldly. "Olivia's a child—"

"She's eighteen," I put in. "A mature eighteen."

". . . who's always been sheltered," Aunt Harriet went on, not hearing me. "Of all the girls, Olivia deserves the very best and I mean to see that she gets it. The best certainly doesn't include a husband who has some insane idea of becoming a policeman."

Dopey Amos Burke actually thought he might make Miss Harriet Richards see at first glance some of the values that he'd found in law-enforcement work. "Miss Richards," I said, "I'm not planning on a lifetime job directing traffic at Cherry and Raleigh or riding a prowl car through Lighthouse Park—though there's nothing wrong with that, believe me. What I intend to do is—"

"You're wasting my time, young man," she barked. "What I want from you before I consider continuing your acceptability in this house is your word that you'll give up this juvenile nonsense and take your place in your family's business." She clicked her false teeth and tagged on a snapper. "Which, I might add, could be suspect, too, if I were not so generous where it concerns Olivia's wishes."

That did it. F. X. Burke might have come up the hard way but there was nothing "suspect" about any deal he'd ever been connected with, and this in a field where conniving was generally accepted as part of the industry. "Just what do you mean by that?" I asked slowly, with what might have been described as ominous calm.

She moved a hand impatiently. "We'll not go into such shabby things as political bribery in return for lucrative contracts," she told me. "What I'm concerned with now is this ludicrous—"

"Let's go into those shabby things first," I said, and when I dared interrupt Old Ironsides I really must have been burned. "My father has a pair of the cleanest hands a human ever had hung on the ends of his arms—and from what I've heard, Cyrus Richards couldn't exactly make that claim when he was wheeling and dealing with the McKinley Administration, gobbling up all those public lands."

Hoo boy! Her face might have been in shadow but the sparks from her eyes were plain enough for even a hot headed nitwit like me to see. When she spoke, her voice was cold enough to make a ski slope out of a freshly dumped slag heap.

"I suppose I should be outraged by your insult to my father's memory," she told me, "but when I consider that I'm dealing with a mentality that aspires to the giddy heights of writing parking tickets and clubbing drunks in waterfront saloons, I find myself contemptuous rather than angry. Good-bye, Mr. Burke."

"Look, Miss Richards, I'm sorry," I said. "I blew my stack when you said that about the Old Man. I apologize."

"Good-bye, Mr. Burke."

"Can't we start over?" I begged. "Give me just a couple of minutes more and I think I can make you see that—"

"Miss Anderson"—that was the secretary—"will you see Mr. Burke to the door, please?"

I knew I'd lost the round, but what was one round? I bowed to the old girl and started for the door. When I had my hand on the knob I turned and said, "Miss Richards, I guess it's only fair to warn you that Olivia and I are going to be married whether you approve or not."

She made a sound that might have been a laugh. If it was, it was the unmerriest laugh I ever heard in my life. "You think so, Mr. Burke?" she asked me.

"I know so," I said, and walked out.

Oh, sure, I knew a lot, I did. I had everything figured. When I saw Olivia, after hanging around Cedar Hill for a couple of hours, sitting in my car out of some juvenile reluctance to be under the same roof with somebody who didn't want me there, my beloved listened to my account of what had happened in the dragon's den and sighed. "Oh, dear," she said. "Aunt Harriet is getting things all mixed up more and more lately. I wish I'd known what was going on; I could have straightened her out about this ridiculous idea she has that you're going to be a policeman." She gave a little chuckle. "Imagine it," she said.

She patted me on the arm and said, "You just wait here; I'll run upstairs and fix everything, dear. When I've made Aunt Harriet see that she had everything cockeyed, you can come up and—"

"Just a little minute, my pet," I said. "There's one little thing I think you ought to know before you run upstairs and fix everything."

"Oh?" she looked at me, her gray eyes wide, her lovely face puzzled.

"Uh-huh," I told her. "The fact is that I'm going to be a policeman, Olivia. I thought you knew that."

There followed a scene I've tried a thousand times to forget since that day, and succeeded in only dimming. Once Olivia got it through her beautiful head that I was not laughing it up, she argued, she pleaded and finally she broke into tears. I couldn't love her, not really, if I persisted in going through with this ridiculous idea. I had deceived her, hiding this terrible thing from her. It was time I grew up; instead of playing cops and robbers, I should be preparing myself to take over the "Burke Empire" (as our competitors were fond of calling it in their frequent—and unsuccessful—monopoly complaints) so that our children would have a father they could look up to, not a nut who turned his back on all that opportunity just so he could wear a tin badge.

I credit myself with keeping my temper, although it took a lot of doing. First, I tried to kid her out of her outrage. Then I tried to explain how modern-day law enforcement was a science any disciple of which could proudly claim as his profession. No soap. Olivia was as bad as Aunt Harriet when it came to holding fast to the Nast cartoon of the Gay Nineties patrolman in his bucket helmet, dipping his red nose in the foam of a free beer at the back door of the corner saloon.

"Me give up my friends, my—my way of life, to play junior G-man with you?" she wound up crying. "You must be out of your mind!"

While I stood there, an incoherent stricken elk, she fumbled at her neckline and pulled out the ring she'd been wearing on a chain until the formal engagement announcement. It was a suitably strong chain but it could have been cheap thread when she jerked at it with both furious hands. It snapped and the ring fell to the gravel driveway with a clink, and lay between us. I think she started to stoop to pick it up, but if she did she changed her mind in a hurry. And damned if *I* was going to pick it up. It could lie there until it had pups for all of me.

So we stood there outside Cedar Hill, Amos Hardhead Burke and Olivia Thwarted-Woman Richards, and for one white second we looked at each other and wished we had the sense to give in, surrender our separate stands, grab each other and cling close until this crisis passed. But the second went by, the chance was lost, and Olivia turned on a spike heel and marched away toward the house, her shoulders straight, her head up, her hands balled into fists at her side.

I watched her go and then I got into my car—*yes, by God, I'd show her who was boss of this combination!*—and drove away.

That was the last time I'd seen Olivia. Oh, yes, I'd come to my senses as soon as I got home and phoned her to beg her forgiveness, but she wouldn't even speak to me. I knew Huston, who had reason to be on my side, did his best to coax her to the phone, but no soap.

"Give her a little time, Mr. Burke," the butler advised me. "She'll be bound to see what a mistake this is if you give her time."

Of course, I should have stormed the fortress, Cedar Hill, crashed in there and grabbed Olivia and kissed some sense into her, but I didn't; I could be as knotheaded as she. I finally stopped phoning and writing and even moping around after about six months.

I hadn't seen her since that April day, I say, but I'd heard plenty about her. While I was in Korea something happened to the gentle, gracious girl I'd loved, and she'd started along a route as reckless, as inevitably headed for disaster as Millicent's. Olivia was less flagrant in her dancing and prancing than Millicent, but no less feverish, or so it sounded to me. When I got back from overseas she'd been married twice, had one annulment and one divorce on her record, and was making the gossip columns as having her eye on a Brazilian playboy for her third. This despite the fact that the Brazilian was married to a bosomy, blasphemous movie star who was holding press conferences almost daily to assure her public that she had no intentions of giving up Didi (I presumed that was the Brazilian's nickname or maybe they name rich boy babies Didi in Brazil) without a fight that would make a piker out of the Dempsey-Firpo go.

Olivia never married the Brazilian but she did marry somebody else and somebody else and then another husband, until now, when Millicent was murdered, she was the till-death-do-us-part spouse of this Nels Manning, according to Harris, the stag-magazine reporter who hung ten. I'd watched Olivia's ride on the merry-go-round from a distance and with a certain guilt: If I hadn't been so stubborn, things might have been so different with her. That guilt had hit me a particularly painful wallop a couple of months previously, when the Richards family lawyer, a friend of mine named Bill Garrabrandt, had told me:

"It's such a waste, Amos! Olivia's still young, she's almost as beautiful as ever and she's got more money than even she could throw away in a lifetime, but she doesn't know what happiness is. She hasn't got one damned thing to make life worthwhile." And added: "What scares me is the possibility that one rainy day all this will crowd in on her and she'll decide to hell with it; it's not worth the bother of keeping on."

At the time I'd told myself no, not Olivia. No matter how much she'd changed she'd never go that route. But Bill's gloomy musing had bothered me almost to the point of getting in touch with Olivia to see if I could help in any way, as an old friend, not as an old flame. Good sense came to my rescue in time: what could I possibly say to Olivia?

And what was I going to say to her now when I went to Cedar Hill to question the Richards family as Amos Burke, Captain of Homicide, the cop whose wife Olivia couldn't bear to be?

3.

The last time I'd been there I'd been driving a hot sports car; this time I went in the Rolls with Henry driving and with Detective Tim Tilson on one side and Sergeant Les Hart on the other, my right and left bowers. Lieutenant George McLeod, my ace of trumps, I left at Harris' beach house with the bronzed surfer, the department photographers, the lab men, the coroner's crew and the others.

A word about that much publicized Rolls. Regardless of the purple-tongued comments of my inspector and the occasional jeer from the press, I didn't use the

Rolls to let everybody know that there went the millionaire cop, Captain Amos Burke of Homicide, the only policeman in the world (so far as I knew; I could have been wrong) who went to work in a Rolls-Royce. Actually, the car had been F. X. Burke's in his lifetime and he loved it for the perfect piece of machinery it was and is. When he died I intended to sell it, but Henry, my houseman-chauffeur-chef and good friend, begged me to keep it.

"Like giving away one of the family," he grieved. "Alla work I put in on her to make her bes' car inna world, how can you sell my big baby?"

As I consider Henry the luckiest thing that ever happened to me, I couldn't sell his "big baby." At first I used a smaller car to get places in, thinking that the Rolls might be a little pretentious for a hard-working plainclothesman, then sergeant, then lieutenant of Homicide. But when I made captain I decided that, as in the Army, Rank Has Privileges, and with Henry at the wheel of the Rolls, getting places was more than half the fun, and relaxing besides. When Henry drove me in the Rolls I could sit back and think better than I could anyplace else; with Henry driving us I could talk to witnesses and even suspects more profitably than anyplace else (there must be something conducive to honest cooperation about the rear seat of a forty-thousand-dollar car) and Henry could get me anywhere I wanted to go in about three-fifths the time I could drive there myself. *Ergo,* as the feller sez, the Rolls being more practical, more comfortable and speedier, to hell with the critics. I used the Rolls.

On our way to Cedar Hill, the Richards estate, about whose high stone walls the city had crept since

Cyrus Richards built it, I wondered what we were going to find there. I knew that Aunt Harriet had been ill recently, a stroke or a heart attack, and her one-time position as matriarch of the clan might have changed: now she might be the invalid old-maid aunt, cared for by the nieces whose lives she'd once dictated so ruthlessly. (Or had tried to dictate, in Millicent's case, and —after the Amos Burke affair—Olivia's.)

But perhaps Aunt Harriet hadn't changed at all. She'd been a fierce old gal with tremendous drive, and a little thing like a stroke or a bum ticker could hardly change her into a quaveringly sweet old lady. My money was on the latter possibility.

As for the Richards girls themselves, they'd slid past the age when they could be called girls—thirty-three this past May nineteenth. Oh, yes, I remembered the date, all right; Olivia had wanted to be married on her birthday (we were going to have a proper year-long engagement, of course) and I'd made the feeble joke that I was all for it because I could make one present do for two, birthdays and anniversaries, in years to come. I knew Olivia had changed completely, both by word of mouth and bits and pieces in the papers, but I knew nothing about the other two surviving sisters, Meredith and Jane.

I turned to my Answer Man, Tim Tilson, who seldom missed coming up with what I wanted to know. "How about Meredith and Jane Richards?" I asked him. "I've lost touch with them."

For one of the very few times since he joined the department, young Tilson had to shake his head. "I don't know anything about them," he said in deep embarrassment, and added quickly, "but I can find out."

Les filled the gap, as Les so often did. "I can tell you about one of them—Meredith," he offered. "She's a prominent member of Steiner's little chowder-and-marching society."

"Steiner?" I asked.

His hard, lined face twitched in a grimace. "Professor Alan Steiner," he explained. "Don't tell me you haven't heard tell of Steiner's nutty club, Captain, the collection of oddballs he calls the Steiner School of Metaphysical Research?"

"Meredith Richards belongs to that crowd?" Tilson asked. He sounded almost shocked.

"Belongs to it? Hell, she's Steiner's bankroll," my sergeant said. "It was her dough that bought and remodeled that temple, or whatever Steiner calls it. She hooked up with that bunch four or five years ago, right after her marriage to that guy Hugh Johnston went down the pipe."

I remembered Hugh Johnston. He was one of the crowd of socially acceptable but financially embarrassed young men who hung around the Richards quads, being bright and gay and clever and hoping to God they'd be visited by a miracle and land Meredith or Jane or Olivia. After Olivia chose me, it cut the field to Meredith and Jane, but the number of hopefuls grew no smaller; the lads simply got a little more hectic because where there had been three chances, now there were only two. Of course, Millicent was always available, but not for marriage, and these lads wanted security more than what, after all, must have been a stimulating experience as provided by poor Millicent.

As I remembered Johnston, he hadn't stood a Chinaman's chance of scoring because he had even less walking around money than the others and Aunt Harriet knew all credit ratings down to the last nickel. So Hugh had finally got Aunt Harriet's OK to marry Meredith? How come?

It was as though Les had been reading my mind. "Johnston's family fell into a potful in electronics, all of a sudden," he explained. "The trouble was, he couldn't stand prosperity or something; he ran away with a waitress about six months after he married Meredith."

"How about Jane?" I asked. "Know anything about her?"

"Nothing on Jane," Hart told me. "The only reason I can give you any line on Meredith is that Tracy's Vice Squad has been keeping an eye on Steiner's kaffee-klatsch to see if they step over the line."

"In their metaphysical research?"

"Well, it seems to be a pretty broad field, at least the way Steiner works it. They have these services that aren't exactly Primitive Baptist and they've got a beach place where they try a little metaphysical nudism or something. Tracy thinks the whole schmear is to play *vive la différence* in the name of scientific research, but he hasn't been able to put anything solid on Steiner yet."

I sighed, deep down inside myself. Four lovely, gifted girls with all the advantages that money and breeding could give them, and three of them, at least, had gone off the track. Perhaps Millicent had been born with an uncontrollable sex urge but the other three sisters had been normal, healthy-minded specimens during their childhood and adolescence. Whatever had happened to them later had to be blamed on Miss Harriet Richards, the cold-souled spinster who had about as much right as Medusa to raise four girls.

I was pondering this sad fact when Henry drove through the open gate of Cedar Hill and up the drive shaded by the tall trees that gave the place its name. As we came up to the porte cochere I saw that no matter how much its occupants might have changed, the house itself was exactly as I remembered it, a beautiful, sprawling Tudor masterpiece that somehow seemed to offer gracious hospitality even though it had provided precious little of that commodity ever since the quads' parents had died in that wreck off Kodiak Island.

One of the toughest parts of a policeman's job is telling a family that "there's been an accident" to one of their loved ones. Since I'd made captain I hadn't had to do this often (I admit I ducked the chore shamelessly, giving it to one of my men every time I was faced with it) but in my early days in the department I'd had my share of ringing doorbells and bracing myself for what was bound to come after I told my little story, using the worn-out phrases in an effort to disguise the ugly fact, having to watch the wife or the mother, the husband or the father, break up when the truth sank in. It was never pretty, that reaction. Perhaps ministers, priests and rabbis can break the news without somehow feeling guilty about it, but I never could.

So why was I out there at Cedar Hill instead of letting Les or Tim or George handle it? I didn't really know, but for some reason it seemed only right that I should do the dirty job myself. I'd never actually been close to Millicent Richards. As a matter of fact, she scared me, always on the make for her sister's boy friend, always hinting and sometimes not bothering to hint that just because I was about to become engaged to Olivia there was no reason I should pass up some quickie fun behind the nearest potted palm. I'd always made out I knew she was just kidding but—well, let's face it—if I'd been a tiny bit less in love with Olivia, I might have said OK, let's, to one of those invitations from Millicent. So I shied off from her as though she had the measles, so far as I was able. Not that I'd ever held her in contempt or even clucked my tongue over the things she did; I don't want to pose as the all-time compassionate Big Brother, but the truth is that I knew she wasn't really responsible for most of it. She was sick, sick, sick in her own spectacular way.

I'd held her off, I say, but I remembered the last time I'd seen her, when she'd warned me that I was on my way to Aunt Harriet's chopping block, and maybe I owed Millicent this visit for having tipped me off that time. I don't know; I only know I felt I had to be the one who told Aunt Harriet and the other sisters, even Olivia, about what had happened.

(Later, Tim Tilson dipped into his store of sandlot psychiatry and came up with the possibility that I subconsciously wanted to avenge myself on Aunt Harriet by appearing as Amos Burke, Captain of Homicide, and informing her that one of the girls she had been charged with protecting was dead, probably murdered; but I wouldn't buy this—in fact, I threw most of Tim's Freud-for-the-beginner offerings in the first sergeant's file, the ashcan.)

When I rang the bell the door was opened by the same butler, Huston, grown a little grayer about the temples but otherwise unchanged. He recognized me and gave me a quarter bow. "Mr. Burke," he said. "A pleasure to see you again, sir."

"Thank you, Huston," I said. "It's Captain Burke, Homicide, now, and I'm afraid we have to see Miss Harriet on police business."

He had a thin, pale face with washed-out blue eyes that were protuberant to begin with and bulged tennis-ball big when I told him why we were there. His Adam's apple went up and down over the vee of his wing collar before he asked, "Is it Miss Jane, sir?"

"No, Millicent," I said, and hauled out the old reliable. "There's been an accident."

"But she was here this morning, Mr. Burke," Huston protested. "She ran in for a few minutes and—and—" The pale face was sort of gray-green now. "How bad is it, sir?"

"Very bad," I told the butler. His bulging eyes asked me the inevitable question and I nodded. "She's dead," I said, and added inanely, "it was very quick, if that's any consolation."

He shook his head dazedly. "Poor little girl," he murmured. "I tried to make her stay. She was—she looked exhausted, sir, and I tried to convince her she should get some rest. But she wouldn't listen to me." He shook his head again and looked at me almost apologetically, as though it were his fault that Millicent had gotten herself into harm's way this last time. "She never did—listen to me, I mean. But she was a sweet girl, Mr. Burke, no matter what they say."

"I know," I said. "How about seeing Miss Harriet? Or if she's too ill to take something like this, how about one of the other sisters?"

He looked back over his shoulder, down the hall toward the stairway ascending to the upper floors, then back at me. "I'm afraid it would be too much for Miss Harriet in her condition, sir. Miss Meredith's in the music room. Perhaps—"

"All right, we'll talk to her first," I nodded. Huston led us into the library, with its floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, and started to go for Meredith. I called after him. "I'd prefer you didn't tell her what's happened, Huston." He nodded and went out.

Tim wandered around the library, examining the books with something that approached awe. "Every one a collector's item," he breathed. "Man, what I wouldn't give to be locked in here alone for a couple of months. All this priceless reading and nobody to bother me."

"Alone, you'd go nuts in twenty-four hours." Les Hart grinned. "You wouldn't have anybody you could impress with what you found out, reading the books, and you'd flip."

Tim was about to offer rebuttal to that crack when Meredith Richards appeared in the hall doorway. She was wearing a blue satin robe, belted at the middle, and from the expanse of tanned skin visible in the deep vee of the neckline, that was all she had on except the raffia scuffs on her bare feet.

If there were gradations of beauty among the Richards quads, I suppose Meredith would be termed the most classically beautiful. When I was in love with Olivia I had to admit that Meredith came closest to my beloved's perfection, but later, when I was able to remember the sisters with a fair amount of objectivity, I saw that line by line in face and figure, Meredith held the edge over the other three. She made her five feet ten, the quads' identical height, taller by her superb carriage, and this remarkable posture was evident in all its graceful beauty as she came across the library toward me, chiseled chin up, shoulders back but not squared, splendid breasts thrusting their points against the blue satin.

"What's wrong, Amos?" she asked as she came closer. "Huston wouldn't tell me but—is it Jane?"

That made two people, Huston and Meredith, who had blurted the same instinctive question: was it something about Jane that had brought the police to Cedar Hill? I wondered why this concern for the oddball sister when it seemed to me that Millicent was the one most likely to be involved in a police matter.

"No, Meredith," I said, as gently as a big horse like me could. "It's Millicent."

She was close to me by that time, so close that I could smell the perfumed warmth of her body and see the tiny beads of perspiration at her hairline and on her upper lip.

"She's smashed up her car again," Meredith said swiftly. "Huston told me she'd been drinking when she ran in here and stole my lunch basket and ran out again. Oh, Amos, we've warned her so many times not to drive when she was tight, but she wouldn't listen. How badly is she—"

She stopped and her heavily fringed eyes widened. "But you're captain of *Homicide,* aren't you, Amos? Does that mean that Millicent's dead?"

I nodded and she took a step toward me, threw her arms around me and pressed close in the shock of her grief. She clung there, not exactly weeping but making low sounds that were more wrenching than sobs, soft cries that were despairing more than sorrowful. I patted her shoulder in a fatherly way. It seemed the only thing I could do. I never was much good at consoling people; about the best I could come up with was *there, there,* or something just as feeble.

Meredith stayed in my arms only a little while before she stepped back, her eyes damp but not swollen, still the beautiful creature she had always been, and asked, "How did it happen?"

"We don't know all the details yet," I said. "She was at Gil Harris' beach cottage and—"

"That animal!" she burst out. "Have you caught him yet?"

The real hate in her voice surprised me. From what little I knew about Harris, I'd pegged him as a handsome, stupid muscle boy who thought the ability to curl all ten toes over the end of a surfboard was the acme of mortal man's achievement. I could understand a brainy woman like Meredith Richards ridiculing a man like Gil but I couldn't see her hating him. As for the name "animal," well, Gil Harris was a perfect physical specimen of today's *homo sapiens,* and considering the size of his brain, perhaps that "animal" tag suited him, but not the way Meredith said it.

"He's in custody, at least as a material witness," I told the girl in the blue robe. "He didn't try to run; as a matter of fact, he was the one who called the police."

"I warned Millicent about Gil," Meredith said. "I told her she'd better stay away from him before—" She flashed a look up at me, then dropped her eyes and let her sentence lie there, needing an ending. I waited awhile and then prompted her, pretty sure it wouldn't do any good.

"Millicent should stay away from Gil before what happened, Meredith?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Nothing," she muttered. "I mean, I told Millicent she ought to have more pride than to let a moron like Harris—" She broke it off again and for the first time she seemed aware of Les Hart and Tim Tilson standing by. She looked at them, then back at me. "You used to be a friend of the family, Amos; couldn't you handle this by yourself?" she asked me. "Is it necessary for a lot of people to be brought into it? Any more scandal—I'm afraid of what it might do to Aunt Harriet."

I didn't say the first thing that came to mind—that by this time Aunt Harriet ought to have become fairly used to scandal. Instead I said, "If it's homicide, we've got to find out who killed Millicent. These men are going to work with me to get this cleaned up as quickly as possible and with as little publicity as possible. Sergeant Hart and Detective Tilson, Miss Meredith Richards—or is it Mrs. Johnston?"

"Richards, of course," she said. "But isn't this an open-and-shut thing? Gil Harris beat Millicent up once too often and killed her. I saw it coming—we all saw it coming."

"It's not quite that simple," I said. "You mentioned Millicent stealing your lunch basket, Meredith. Tell us a little more about that."

She flourished her long, slim hands in exasperation. "What has that to do with anything?"

"Quite a lot," I said. "You packed a picnic basket?"

"Yes, the—a group I'm associated with is planning to meet down at the beach place this evening for a picnic supper. I knew I'd be tied up all afternoon with my exercises—that's what I was doing when Huston came for me just now—so I made up my lunch or supper or whatever it is this morning, right after breakfast."

"You mixed the martinis that far ahead of time?"

She nodded without hesitating. "That's a good Thermos and besides, I don't like my martinis so cold I can't taste them." She half turned and looked at Tim and asked, "Young man, seeing Mr. Burke insists on being mysterious perhaps you'll be good enough to tell me what this is all about?"

Tim caught my nod. "It looks as though your sister died from a martini that was spiked with cyanide, Miss Richards," he told her. "A martini from the Thermos you say you filled this morning."

For a second I thought that Meredith the cool, Meredith the self-possessed, was going to fall over in a dead faint. The blood drained out of her face, leaving her rich tan an unhealthy gray, and she wavered a moment before I put out a hand to steady her. She said something in a low voice, but not so low that Tim and Les and I couldn't hear her. We heard her, all right.

"So she did it," Meredith said. "She tried to kill me and she killed poor Millicent instead. For a few filthy dollars. Oh, Olivia. *Olivia!*"

Chapter Two

I.

Exclamations blurted out at the moment of shock impact have only a 40-percent validity rating: Burke's Law.

I reminded myself of this rule as I looked down at Meredith and hoped that this muttered plaint belonged in the 60-percent invalid category. For if I interpreted correctly, what Meredith was saying was that Olivia had poisoned the martinis, knowing they were Meredith's, and Millicent had stolen the Thermos and had been killed by mistake. That "few filthy dollars" crack had a fairly obvious explanation, too: Meredith was accusing Olivia of wanting her dead so that Meredith's share of the Richards fortune would be whacked up among the survivors, including Olivia.

A month or so before all this I'd heard Garrabrandt, the Richardses' lawyer, say that Olivia had more money than even she could throw away in her lifetime. If Bill knew what he was talking about, Meredith's idea was crazy. But Meredith must be in a better position to know if one of her sisters was suffering from the tights than an outsider, even the family lawyer. If the woman I'd once loved was in some hush-hush financial jam she'd probably keep it from Garrabrandt so it wouldn't get back to Aunt Harriet; but as close as the sisters had always been, she'd have trouble hiding it from Meredith, Jane and Millicent.

I waited until Meredith got a grip on herself again after that ashen-faced, low-voiced outburst. Then I asked, "Why Olivia?"

She should have tried for a stage career. She looked at me wide-eyed and asked, "Olivia? What about Olivia?"

I knew that all the safeguards were in place again. If the four Richards quadruplets had one characteristic in common it was their polite, detached, adamantine refusal to be tricked, coaxed, bullied or baited into saying anything they didn't want to say, so I said, "Skip it." Later, if it seemed necessary, George or Les could really work Meredith over, put her through a questioning session qualified to break down even a Richards' resistance, but right now I figured we'd be wasting time that could be better spent otherwise.

I looked at the vee in the blue robe and the swelling, tanned flesh visible there. I remembered the perspiration that had dewed Meredith's hairline and her upper lip when she had first come into the room. It was a warm day out but Cedar Hill was air-conditioned, so where had Meredith been, why had she been perspiring as though she'd had to run to be where Huston had expected her to be when he called her?

The pool? But her feet weren't wet and, besides, the butler hadn't had time to go down to the pool to get her.

I knew this couldn't have anything to do with Millicent's death, but it was something that didn't fit and in a homicide investigation it's best to clear up as many non-fitting items as soon as possible so they don't clutter up the background. So I said:

"Huston told us you were in the music room. He must have been wrong, huh? You were in the shower?"

She shook her golden, high-piled head. "No, I told you I was doing my exercises in the music room." She looked down at herself, then up at me, her mouth quirked. "You mean my dishabille, Amos? But Stee suggests we do our exercises in the nude. It gives the soul more chance to breathe—untrammeled, you see."

"I'm all for untrammeled souls," I said, "but what kind of exercises and who's Stee?"

"They're yoga exercises and Stee is Dr. Alan Steiner. And before you ask me why I don't exercise in my bedroom, I'll explain that the music room has more space and light, the hi-fi's there and it's out of reach of Aunt Harriet's voice."

When I put up my eyebrows at that last crack she looked properly penitent. "A nasty thing to say, wasn't it?" She asked me. "You know I love Aunt Harriet better than anybody else in the world but since she's been sick she's become—so demanding. I mean, if she knows one of us is within calling distance she yells for us to come sit with her, she's dying, she won't last another five minutes. If she thinks we're out or downstairs, here, she's perfectly content to read or watch her little bedside TV or nap or play gin with her nurse, Mrs. Keogh. Stee says she's that way because—but I forget, you don't know Stee."

"Isn't he the one who runs a school for metaphysical research?" I asked.

She made her eyes round in real or phony surprise. "How clever of you, Amos. I thought you'd be so busy arresting people and solving crimes that you wouldn't have any time for any cultural interests."

Before I could say anything about that, she cried, "But here we are wasting time talking when Millicent's been killed and somebody's got to tell Aunt Harriet." She glanced up at the ceiling of the library toward the second floor, where the old dragon lay in her lair, and bit her lip. "Jane would be the best one to break the news—she's Aunt Harriet's current favorite—but she's probably locked in the lathe house, torturing her trees, and Olivia's out somewhere with Nels. She's been forbidden Aunt Harriet's room anyway, so I guess it's up to me."

"Olivia's persona non grata with Aunt Harriet?" I asked.

She flirted a long hand. "She gets these streaks, Amos, first against one of us and then the others. Presently she's convinced that Olivia is trying to—" And broke it off again, shook her head in self-disapproval and hurried on to say, "So I guess it's up to me."

Les Hart said bluntly, "You mean Aunt Harriet thinks Olivia is figuring on poisoning her, too, like she did Millicent?"

Meredith swung around so violently that the blue robe sagged open revealingly for a moment before she clutched it close again. Her voice was frosty. "I don't know what redress a person has against such slanders, Sergeant Hart, but I consider that an inexcusably vicious remark."

Oh, come off it, Meredith, I said silently. *You've done everything but spell it out for us that Olivia gimmicked the martinis she thought you were going to drink and that Aunt Harriet's so scared of her that she won't let her in the sickroom.*

But instead of reminding her of this, I only said, "Suppose I break the news to Aunt Harriet?"

She turned back to me, her look calculating. "You'd do that after what she did to you?"

I shrugged. "All in a day's work for a cop," I explained. "And that was a long time ago, Meredith."

"You won't—I mean this wouldn't be your idea of revenge, would it, Amos?" Before I could react to that little tidbit, she blurted, "No, of course not. I'm sorry I said that, but this thing—I'm not thinking very straight, am I?"

"It's been a shock," I said noncommittally. Privately I may have thought that Meredith had shown amazing lack of shock considering she'd just been told her sister had been murdered, according to her own poorly-concealed thought processes, by another of her sisters and in her, Meredith's, place, but I didn't say anything about this. In my experience, one woman might collapse in total grief and another might seem heartlessly cool and yet the second could be numbed while the first might be putting on a big tear-jerking act. One of the points of Burke's Law was: *In crime investigation first impressions are almost never significant.*

I said, "I'll go up with you just as soon as I give my little helpers here something to do while we're seeing Aunt Harriet." I started to give Les and Tim their orders, then turned back as Meredith came up with a dilly.

"I should have asked this earlier, Amos," she said, "but aren't you supposed to have some kind of court order to come in here and ask all these questions? Isn't it the law that we're entitled to have a lawyer present to advise us?"

I looked at her without speaking for ten full seconds, letting her words just lie there between us. She flushed a bit under her tan but her eyes held mine with a sort of defiant—what was it, fear?

"Why, I suppose you could refuse to say anything without counsel present," I said finally. "If the whole family clammed up, if you all started throwings things in our way so we'd have to do it the hard way, that's the way we'd do it. We'd get everything we're looking for, I can promise you that, but this case would land right on the front pages and stay there until we were through—I can promise you that, too."

Her chin came up and she almost sneered. "Threats—so it is revenge, after all."

"Look, lady," Les Hart said patiently, "you don't seem to get the idea. Your sister, Millicent Richards, has either been murdered or she's committed suicide. If it was murder we've got to find out who did it, or if it was suicide we've got to make sure that's what it was. Captain Burke is handling this himself because he's a friend of the family. You keep on playing games and the captain's liable to walk out and leave the case with me and some other characters like me. You wouldn't like that at all because us inexcusably vicious lowbrows get fat on cutting high-society people down to size. That I guess you *could* call revenge, lady, because in the old days—not now—we've seen too many people get away with murder, and I mean murder, just because they had a lot of dough."

The sergeant's little speech surprised me almost as much as it must have surprised Meredith; usually Les was fairly inarticulate except in the squad-room bull sessions. His blunt sincerity had its effect on the girl in the blue robe. She knew Les meant what he said; she must have imagined a squad of Les Harts descending on Cedar Hill, all armed with rubber hoses.

She came through like a trouper. "I apologize, Sergeant," she said. "To Captain Burke and to you and this other gentleman, too. I guess I've been reading too many detective stories. Of course we want to cooperate with you—all of us do."

She looked at me. "Could you wait for me to get into some clothes before we go up to Aunt Harriet? She's a stickler for the proprieties—well, it would be easier. It would only take me a minute."

"Sure," I said. "One thing, though; I'd prefer that you didn't tell any of the others what's happened until we've seen your aunt."

She shook her head. "Honor bright, I won't say a word."

And off she went in a hurry, leaving a fragrant scent of Hermès Calèche and warm, clear skin.

A dish, Miss Meredith Richards, the ex-Mrs. Johnston. As I turned back to Les and Tim, I wondered how Johnston had failed her, or her him, so that their marriage had gone on the rocks. I'd have been willing to bet that the fine hand of Aunt Harriet had had something to do with it.

2.

When the nurse opened the door to Aunt Harriet's room after Meredith's knock, I stepped over the threshold and walked right back into April of 1950.

The guardian of the Richards quadruplets was propped in the same chair she'd sat in that day she threw the harpoon into a large, stupid whale named Amos Burke. Somehow I'd had the idea that Aunt Harriet was permanently bedridden but today, at least, she was up and in her favorite throne near the windows overlooking the manicured gardens. She sat there with pillows piled around her and a knitted throw over her lap, her gray hair in the same severe knot I remembered, her thin face as bitterly vital and imperious as it always had been.

She looked past Meredith with her bright black eyes, recognized me at first glance, meshed all the gears of her incredibly sharp mind and asked, "Millicent or Jane?"

I didn't think for a minute that she'd mistaken Meredith for Jane or Millicent. No, she knew I was Captain of Homicide, she knew I'd not be calling on her except in line of duty, she knew that homicide meant violent death. This knowledge told Aunt Harriet immediately that calamity had befallen one of her brood, and Jane, the moody oddball, and Millicent had come to mind—

Jane, who had always lived her life away from her sisters, and Millicent the unmanageable, Millicent, whose torturous inner itch had led her from one dangerous scrape to another. Aunt Harriet knew that one or the other had brought Captain Amos Burke of Homicide to her room this Saturday afternoon.

There was no sense in offering the "There's been an accident" line to this perceptive old lady, so I said, "I'm afraid its Millicent, Miss Richards."

"Who killed her—one of the hoodlums she ran with?" Her voice was a dry rustle, devoid of all emotion.

"We don't know," I said, "but we'll find out."

A nurse, who had been hovering in the background, came up to the old lady's side and murmured something. Aunt Harriet shook her head fiercely and snapped, "No I don't need any of your pills or potions. That's the trouble with the world today: don't face reality; take a tranquilizer and forget it happened. Shut your eyes to it and maybe it'll go away."

"But Aunt Harriet—" Meredith began.

"Don't 'but Aunt Harriet' me," the old lady crackled. "Oh I know you'd like me to fill myself with the sedatives that fool doctor tries to force on me so I wouldn't know what was going on around here. But I'm still very much alive, my dear, and I intend to stay undoped and wide awake until you put pennies on my eyes. And that won't be as soon as you probably wish, either."

"Don't talk that way," Meredith said softly. "You know none of us—"

"Millicent didn't," Aunt Harriet chirped. "Out of the four of you, I think Millicent was the only one who wouldn't have been happy to see me dead ten years ago. And see what's happened to her."

She brought her black eyes around to meet mine. "How did it happen?" she demanded. "Don't try to pretty it up, Mr. Burke. I'm tough, tougher than anybody you'll find in your pampered generation. I've had to be tough. All my life I've had to— Never mind. How was Millicent murdered?"

"We're not absolutely positive it was murder," I said. "It could have been suicide, although we—"

"Rubbish," she snorted (and it was the first time I'd ever actually heard the word used that way). "Millicent Richards could no more kill herself than she could jump over the moon. I know. Despite the way she treated it, that girl loved her own body. She could never destroy it."

Meredith said, "She might have found out that she had some incurable disease. She always dreaded getting old and sick. She always said she hoped she'd be killed in an auto accident rather than linger on with an illness."

"No matter what she said or didn't say, that girl loved life more than the other three of you girls put together," Aunt Harriet insisted. "I never approved of the way she lived it but at least she was honest about it; she didn't try to hide her goings-on the way the rest of you do."

Meredith started a reproach and thought better of it. She glanced at me, made a moue, gave an imperceptible shrug of her shoulders.

The woman in the chair asked me, "Where did it happen, Mr. Burke?"

"It's *Captain* Burke," Meredith put in silkily.

"Be quiet," Aunt Harriet told her. "Go someplace where you won't be in the way. Go back to the music room and resume your disgraceful naked contortions." Her rattrap mouth slanted at one corner. "As if you could keep that secret, young lady. When are you girls going to learn that I know everything that goes on around here?"

Meredith flushed. "Who informed on me this time? Olivia or my darling drunken brother-in-law? I always suspected Nels of keyhole-peeking."

"Any woman who makes a vulgar exhibition of herself every day at a certain time, in a certain place, is inviting keyhole-peekers," Aunt Harriet said. "Wasn't that what you were after—the perverted thrill of being watched while you performed this unholy rigmarole?"

Meredith's chin came up as the flush deepened. "I don't intend to stay here and listen to this—this evil-minded talk," she informed us coldly. And turned on her heel and marched her lovely self out of the room. If the door hadn't had a pneumatic check on it I'm sure she would have banged it hard enough to shake the house.

Aunt Harriet paid no attention to Meredith's exit. "Now, Mr. Burke, tell me what happened to Millicent, please."

I gave her the story in the straight, sparse facts that we had. She didn't interrupt, although when I mentioned the name Gil Harris she grunted; it was evident that she knew the beach bum or at least knew of him. "Meredith says she made up the lunch basket, including the martinis, this morning to take to an evening beach affair. This, of course, raises the question of whether the cyanide was intended for Meredith or Millicent, always assuming that Millicent didn't poison the cocktails herself."

I waited as the old lady studied the information I'd given her, her thin face brooding, her knob-knuckled hands restless in her lap. The nurse stayed in the background and I made a mental note to check her out before I was finished here, find out how long she'd been in service at Cedar Hill, how intimately she was connected with family affairs, and all the rest of it. She was a plain-faced, middle-aged woman who walked with a slight limp, no doll who might possibly be tangled up in the amours of any of the four sisters, at least by her beauty, but you never could tell. Live-in nurses ranked only slightly behind doctors and family lawyers in the list of outsiders most likely to become involved in their patients' and clients' lives. And too often in their deaths.

Aunt Harriet finally broke her long silence. "I know this man Harris. One of the girls, Olivia or Jane, brought him here and tried to get me to hire him as chauffeur when Robert retired. Of course, I sent him packing; one look at the creature was enough to convince me he'd be totally impossible as my chauffeur or in any other position on my staff. A most disrespectful young man; when I went through the formality of asking him about his qualifications he told me he was a photographer, an expert on the surfboard and the recorder—some kind of flute, I believe. He seemed to be sneering at me, at all of us. It was a disgraceful exhibition of today's younger generation at its worst."

"You say Jane or Olivia sponsored him?" I asked. "Not Millicent?"

"No, but that didn't mean Millicent wasn't behind the idea. She might have thought I'd veto anybody she wanted and persuaded one of her sisters to speak for her."

"Harris seems to be a friend of Nels Manning," I offered. "At least, he says he came out here to ask Manning to collect Millicent, get her out of the beach shack."

She sniffed. "Anybody who'll drink with Nels Manning is Nels's good friend. That's all he cares for—liquor." She hesitated and added grudgingly, "And Olivia; I have to admit he's deeply in love with Olivia—or was, before alcohol took over completely. About Harris and Nels, they're obviously two of a kind—alcoholics."

"Harris says he doesn't drink and I believe him," I said. "Those muscle boys may have their share of vices but drinking and smoking aren't usually among them; unacceptable to the Lionel Strongfort fetish."

"If Harris is a friend of Nels he must drink," she argued firmly. "It's the only means of communication Nels has with the outside world these days."

I tried to find the name Nels Manning in my mental card-index file and came up with a blank. If I brought anything in the way of natural talent into police work, it was my phenomenal memory. Ever since I was a kid I'd been blessed (and cursed, on occasion) with the gift of almost total recall; I was one of the few people I knew who could really say (but who would rather be strung up by the thumbs than ever say): "I never forget a name or a face." It was a pretty sure thing I'd never met Manning; he couldn't have been one of the lads who'd squired the Richards sisters around when I was going with Olivia. I made another mental note:

run Nels Manning through the computer and see what the punch holes added up to.

I had to take a stab at the touchy subject that was on my mind sooner or later, so I took a deep breath and asked, "Miss Richards, we've found that when a wealthy person is killed by premeditated murder the motive is usually money."

The black eyes in the thin, lined face grew wary, then blanked as Aunt Harriet sniffed again. "Rubbish. You knew Millicent, you must have heard of her escapades since you—made your decision and bowed out of our midst. No, Captain, what happened to Millicent was almost bound to happen. Men, liquor, disreputable companions of both sexes; she dashed headlong for hell and none of us could—could—oh, my God, how I failed my Millicent!"

Astonishingly, the granite-hard face crumpled and tears spilled out of the agate eyes. She fumbled for a handkerchief in her lap as the nurse came hurrying to her side. As she groped for the scrap of linen that she pressed to her streaming eyes, Aunt Harriet dislodged the knitted lap throw and it slid to the floor. I was surprised to see that although she wore a bed jacket over a high-necked cambric nightgown or negligee, from the waist down she was dressed for the street—dark serge skirt, stockings and shoes.

And the shoes were stout black oxfords with particles of damp sand still sticking in the crease between sole and upper.

The nurse whisked the throw back into place, then threw me a dark look, one of those get-out-of-here-you-brute glances that I'd almost got used to over the years.

"You'll have to wait till another time to see Miss Richards, Captain," she told me. "Doctor has left strict orders that she mustn't be upset."

Aunt Harriet said "Rubbish!" again and stopped crying, dabbed at her reddened eyes and said, "Mrs. Keogh, it's time you went down to the kitchen and fixed my tea. Bring a cup for Captain Burke, too, if you please."

The nurse protested but without much conviction; apparently she'd been on this duty long enough to know that when Aunt Harriet gave an order, that was it. Mrs. Keogh left, giving me another black look over her starched shoulder, and as the door closed Aunt Harriet lay back on her pillows and regarded me steadily. "Now what's this about money?" she asked. "Were you getting at anything special or was that just routine?"

It was a surprising switch. A moment before she'd been honestly sure that Millicent's helling around had wound her up dead, but while she'd been weeping those out-of-character tears she'd apparently thought of something that made her want to hear more on the subject of murder-for-profit.

"Call it routine," I hedged. "I just wondered what happened to Millicent's money now?"

"I suggest you ask Meredith," she said, her voice slightly grim.

"But as executrix you'd be the one—" I began.

"I'm not," she broke in. "Meredith is. Didn't your friend Bill Garrabrandt tell you about that?"

I told myself that this old gal must keep close tabs on everybody. I'd met Bill Garrabrandt fairly recently and still she knew we were fairly close friends. Or maybe she didn't keep tabs on *everybody,* just Amos Burke and others like him, people whose lives she'd bolluxed up, her interest sharpened by some sense of triumph or (unimaginable!) guilt.

"He didn't," I said, "and I remember Olivia once saying that you were executrix, Miss Richards."

"So you *were* interested in her money after all, were you?" she snapped. Then, before I could say anything to that, she gave a harsh laugh. "Oh, don't get your hackles up, Inspector—or is it just Captain? I never called you a fortune hunter; you were one of the very few who had more money than the girls. But when Olivia told you I was executrix she was still a minor and I was, but I'm not any longer; I haven't been for —let's see—twelve years. You see, by the terms of my brother Jarvis', will, Meredith became executrix when she and her sisters reached twenty-one."

I probably gasped. "You mean her father named Meredith executrix when she was just a child?"

"It doesn't make sense, does it?" she asked briskly. "Between the two of us, there were a lot of times when Jarvis didn't make much sense, Mr. Burke. A fine man but totally unpredictable."

"But didn't you—" I began.

"Oh, you may be sure I fought the will," she broke in. "I maintained then and I still maintain that it was unfair to the other sisters and too great a responsibility for Meredith to be singled out this way, one baby girl among four identical baby girls, not even the oldest by a few minutes. I wanted the courts to throw out that clause and split the estate up, share and share alike, among all four girls when they attained their majority.

But I lost, and ever since then Meredith has hated me for trying to loosen her hold over the others' money."

"Do you mean she doles out the others' cash?" I asked.

One of the old lady's skeletal hands made a gesture. "They each have adequate allowances—if you call fifty thousand a year an adequate allowance in these times—but none of them can touch the principal of her share without Meredith's signature. Of course, this has caused a lot of bad feeling." She paused and added, "Meredith can be a cruelly selfish woman at times. Very poised, very well-mannered, but utterly immovable when she sets herself against the other three—two now."

"And Millicent's money . . . ?"

"Reverts to the estate after probate. Each of the three surviving sisters eventually will have a considerable sum added to her share, seeing that Millicent died without issue, poor child." Another harsh crow-caw of laughter. "And Meredith no doubt will take delight in refusing to raise any allowances and the fur will fly again."

I thought over this humpty-dumpty situation. If Aunt Harriet had her facts straight, and I couldn't imagine her having them twisted—not Miss Harriet Richards—nobody stood to gain an immediate nickel from Millicent's murder. It followed, therefore, that Meredith's sotto-voce lament might mean something. If Meredith, the hardhearted executrix, was dead . . .

"Does this funny will say who's to become executrix in case of Meredith's death?" I asked Aunt Harriet.

"Olivia," the old girl told me.

3.

When I came downstairs after having tea with Aunt Harriet, I found that Tim Tilson and Les had come up with a fair amount of information while my lieutenant, George McLeod, had got the machinery working smoothly at Harris' beach shack and in the various headquarters departments that go into action whenever a violent death takes place in our fair city.

"George called and said the final autopsy hasn't come up yet but they're pretty sure it's cyanide poisoning; all the symptoms—blue face and the rest," Les told me, consulting his notebook. "They're holding Harris as a material witness and he's yelling his head off: what is this, the Gestapo? The boys are covering that stretch of beach, looking for somebody who saw anything unusual happening around that house this morning or noon. Nothing so far. The house is full of prints but the only readable ones on the Thermos are Millicent's."

"Proving that whoever spiked the martinis wiped the vacuum bottle clean," Tilson offered.

"Or Millicent didn't want to involve anybody else when she did the commit so she wiped the Thermos herself," Hart countered.

I didn't say so out loud but I couldn't see Millicent wiping that bottle even if this was a suicide. If she'd been in that black a frame of mind she wouldn't have worried about prints or the lack of them; few suicides except those motivated by crazy revenge give any thought to how their act might damage other lives. If they can think that clearly, they usually chicken out.

"How can you stick with the suicide theory?" Tim was asking Les. "No last-minute here-goes-nothing when she took the drink. No suicide notes. No nothing."

The sergeant regarded his bright young subordinate patiently. "Read up on your Burke's Law," he advised. "Hasn't the captain told you a million times that it's a hundred-to-one bet that the suicide who really means it won't leave a note or phone anybody or give with the here-goes-nothing bit? The ones who do that stuff want to be stopped."

(Actually, this was nothing original with Burke's Law: it's a fact well known to police everywhere. As were, in fact, most of the points in this so-called Burke's Law, a set of common-sense, proved-out observations that George, Les, Tim and even Henry had half-kiddingly built up into this "Law" thing.)

I had to head off a Tilson-Hart debate, experience versus psychological theory, at all costs, so I asked Les, "How did you make out here?"

"The cook OK's Meredith's story," he told me. "The girl made up her own picnic lunch because it seems that Steiner's happy little group can only eat certain things and Meredith wanted to be sure the dietary laws weren't broken." He looked up from his notebook, his wide mouth wry. "If Gil ever got to that lunch he'd have had to like yogurt and nutburgers and wheat germ and like that or go hungry."

"All this and martinis, too?" I asked.

Tim explained. "From what we gathered from the cook, the butler and a couple of maids, it started out being goat's milk but lately, whenever the boys and girls have an outing, Meredith's packed along some booze. That was a quart Thermos. If she drank it all herself I guess even yogurt and wheat germ would taste good."

I turned to Les Hart. "You said the Vice Squad has been keeping an eye on Steiner's Metaphysical Research School. Did they tell you anything about these outings? According to what I've heard, these get-togethers must have been fairly frequent. Where do they hold these things and what do they do?"

Les shook his head. "I don't know where their beach place is, Captain," he said. "Probably some out-of-the-way place, because they don't go in much for clothes. You heard Meredith—the untrammeled soul and all that sort of jazz."

"Find out if Steiner's beach place is anywhere near Harris'," I told him. He nodded. I asked, "What else?"

Tim said, "The butler, Huston, said Millicent blew into the kitchen about ten-thirty this morning, half plastered and sickish. He said all the help had been told to alert Aunt Harriet when and if Millicent turned up, but it looks as if the old boy was all for Millicent against her sisters and her aunt. Anyway, he said he tried to talk Millicent into grabbing a fast nap before she went up to her aunt's room to catch hell. Millicent said all she wanted right then was a bottle of beer. When she opened the refrigerator—it's a big walk-in job—she spotted Meredith's picnic basket with the Thermos, grabbed it and ran like a thief. Huston tried to stop her but she jumped into her car and off she went, back to Gil Harris."

Hart picked up the story. "The butler went to Meredith and told her what had happened. She said something about waiting awhile before telling Auntie; Millicent would show up again when she found out her fun-ny fun-ny joke of stealing the lunch basket was a bomb—something like that."

I tried to get the picture but it wouldn't come through clearly. There was Millicent, home at last, hung over and beat, knowing she'd overstayed her welcome at Gil's, dead for a hot bath and some sleep. She'd gone to the refrigerator for a bottle of beer—yes, I could understand that; she'd reached the stage where only cold beer could wet down her hot pipes—and she'd seen a lunch basket which she must have recognized as Meredith's. She probably knew that her sister packed a Thermos of cocktails to the metaphysical-research picnics so perhaps the thought of those cold, bitter martinis had made her steal the basket. Or was she so drunk that she'd blacked out and didn't know what she was doing? Or did she think it was worth the enormous effort to drive back to Gil's and get back in his esteem by offering him lunch? Or did she just want to louse up Meredith's beach party?

Or did Millicent know Meredith's martinis were poisoned? Had she taken her own life at the same time she'd saved Meredith's, knowing what she did?

On the heels of that last question came the arguments that shot holes in the theory. How could Millicent, who'd been shacked up with Harris a couple of days, know the martinis had been gimmicked? If Meredith had made the cocktails in the morning, how could the poisoner get to them without being seen by somebody in that busy kitchen? I didn't know how many servants were at Cedar Hill these days, but when I'd been courting Olivia there'd been at least fifteen, and the favorite coffee-and-gossip clubroom of every big household staff was always the kitchen.

There was another possibility: could the martinis have been poisoned *after* Millicent swiped them? Or could the original Thermos have been switched for the cyanide martinis while Millicent was in possession of the lunch basket? Where had she gone after running out with the basket—directly to Gil's?

I told Tilson and Hart, "Find out how many quart Thermos bottles there are in this place. Have George's men try to find somebody who saw Millicent phoning from the beach area Thursday night, all day Friday or Saturday morning. If anybody saw her around town late this morning, I want to know about it. And find out if anybody—*anybody*—who didn't have business there was anywhere near that refrigerator this morning after Meredith packed her lunch."

Les grimaced. "We've already started on that angle and it looks like a nothing. From what I can understand, that walk-in refrigerator is busier than the waiting room at International Airport on a holiday weekend. Everybody in the joint is welcome to walk in and help themselves, be our guest."

I thought back to the time when I'd been a daily visitor to this house and what Les said had been true then. In spite of Aunt Harriet being a stickler for the proprieties in most things, the quads had always had free run of the kitchen and they'd never think of having Huston or a maid bring them a snack if the urge to eat hit them at an odd hour. No, they'd raid the refrigerator and be sure there was always a full stock of goodies there to be raided.

"About the cyanide," Tim Tilson said. "I've got an idea where we might find some of the stuff right here on the home grounds."

"Oh?"

"Well, it's a long chance," my youngest aide admitted, "but I found out that sister Jane has two new hobbies, sky-diving—that's why everybody seemed to think we were here about her, at first—and bonsai."

"You mean she leads cheers in Japanese?" Les asked.

"That's banzai," Tim explained. "Bonsai"—it sounded like bone-sigh to me—"is the art of dwarf-tree culture."

"Man, that's mixing your hobbies," Les exclaimed. "Sky-diving and raising little trees."

I remembered Meredith saying something about Jane probably being in the lathe house (whatever that was) "torturing her trees." I'd let that strange remark pass because at the time I'd been aiming at something I thought was more important, but now I saw that Jane's "torture" of trees was really this bonsai business.

"Do they use cyanide in bonsai?" I asked Tim. I took it for granted he'd be an authority on this esoteric art; somehow he always came up with all the dope usually found only in the good old *Britannica.*

"Once in a while." He nodded. "You see, when you get an *ippon-dachi* that you want to train into a *ne-agari* you have to—"

"I'll take your word for it," I cut in. "The main thing is that cyanide is used. Jane might have some of the stuff in her dwarf-tree workshop."

"Actually," Tim said, "the place where bonsai is pursued is called—"

"Timothy," I broke in again, "there are times when too persistent display of special knowledge is known as showboating. Showboaters often wind up doing dreary jobs such as checking the area around Harris' shack to find out if anybody, even a seagull, saw anything unusual."

"Yessir," Tim said. "Yes, there's an odd chance that Jane might use cyanide, Captain, sir."

"Then," I said, "let's find this lathe house Meredith mentioned and see if Jane will give us some information about her stocks of deadly poison."

I remembered Jane and added, "Knowing the young lady, she won't. Out of general principles."

4.

The lathe house that Huston directed us to turned out to be a tool room and potting shed at one end of the Cedar Hill greenhouses. Meredith had said that Jane was probably locked in and I had visions of knocking on the door and listening to the oddball quad tell me to go fly a kite, she wasn't coming out for a Captain of Homicide or the Secretary General of the UN, for that matter, until she was damn good and ready to. This would be in keeping with dear Jane's attitude as I remembered it. In the old days, to ask Jane to do something was to get an automatic "No!" and unless she'd gotten tired of carrying that oversized chip on her shoulder since I last saw her, it looked like a long, rough road ahead.

But that was before I saw the door of the lathe house standing open and, just inside the doorway and using his hands fluently, my own Henry carrying on a spirited conversation with somebody who was out of our sight but who presumably was Jane Richards, the belligerent misfit.

Henry apparently had gotten tired of waiting in the Rolls and had gone wandering about Cedar Hill, looking over the gardens. Besides being a Cordon Bleu chef, a matchless chauffeur and a valet nonpareil, Henry was also an expert gardener; his one beef about working for me was that I had an apartment instead of a place like this one where he could raise what undoubtedly would be the best flowers ever seen anywhere. To shake his head and cluck his tongue over another gardener's work gave Henry great joy, and in his wanderings he'd happened across Jane's tree-torture chamber and joined her, don't ask me how.

Now he paused in his hand motions as he spotted us and came to the doorway, beaming. "Look, look, Captain Burke," he cried. "Miss Richards has very pretty *yose-uye* except it sick so I tell her how to cure it. Come see."

"Who needs Amos Burke, f'crissake?" a crisp voice asked. I recognized the voice as Jane's and so I knew she hadn't changed a bit since 1950.

She was wearing blue jeans and a sloppy sweater, oversize round glasses with heavy rims, and her hair was a mess, but even in this getup and with a scowl on her face there wasn't a man alive who couldn't see at first glance that Jane had been as richly endowed in the face and body departments as her three sisters. The beatnik sweater did its best to hide Jane's magnificent chest development but it couldn't quite make it; the tight jeans emphasized the neat curve of calf and thigh; she'd been digging in the dirt so she had an assortment of smudges on her face, but even so and despite the frown, the same classical lines that had made Olivia, Meredith, and Millicent renowned beauties showed through, impossible to disguise.

She glowered at me as I stepped into the shed, Tim and Les behind me. "Well, if it isn't the rich man's Hawkshaw," she jeered, for openers. "Still solving the well-bred crimes and sweeping the real manure under the official carpet?"

(NOTE: I have to explain here that in recounting Jane's conversation I've done considerable expurgation. She was almost psychotically profane.)

"Hello, Jane," I said. "To coin a phrase, it's been a long time."

"To coin another," she retorted, "who asked you in here?"

"Henry did," I explained. "Did you two meet or were you so busy over your sick *yose*-whatchamacallit that you skipped the formalities? Henry, this is Miss Jane Richards. Jane, this is Henry." I looked at the clump of dwarf trees in a shallow copper bowl on the bench in front of Jane and said, "This, I suppose, is the patient?"

"Is clump-style Kabubuki, fifty years old," Henry explained. "I was just telling Miss Jane she needs trimming here"—he moved over to point at the miniature grove—"and here and here. Must define triangle more so we get heaven"—touching the tops of the tiny trees—"man"—with a touch at one side—"and earth. Is simple case of growing too fast." He looked at me, his round, brown face shining with his enthusiasm. "Is common failing, Captain Burke: people who love bonsai hate to cut their old friends."

"Not Jane," I said. "You just heard her cut me to the quick and we've been friends for—how many years has it been, Jane?"

She was crouched close to the dwarfed trees, squinting at them through her oversized specs, and she answered absently. "I loved you dearly once but no more, Amos Burke. When you walked out on us by letting Olivia give you the brush instead of kicking her in the teeth as we were betting you'd do and she expected you to do, you went on my drowning list and there you are today, my fine, handsome, debonair—What else do the newspapers call you when they're not frying your hide?"

I rolled with the one-two punch about Jane once having loved me dearly and Olivia having expected me to play rough, and kept my mouth shut; what difference did it all make at this late date? I spoke to Jane's slender back, her firmly packed behind in the tight jeans, as she bent over her bonsai. "Where do you keep your cyanide, Jane?" I asked casually.

She went taut for a second before she slowly straightened and turned, the light refraction in her big lenses hiding whatever her eyes might have been showing. "What about my cyanide?" she asked finally. And then: "Did that sonofabitch really poison her? I'll kill him if he did."

"What sonofabitch, Jane?" I asked. "And who is he supposed to have killed?"

"That drunken bastard Nels, of course," she said fiercely. "He said he would but I thought that was just some more of his booze talk. I never thought he'd dare. I thought he'd never get up the nerve even to poison a helpless old bitch." She turned to the workbench and groped blindly among the tools scattered there, came up with a heavy pair of pruning shears. "Where is he?" she demanded, turning back toward me. "Where is the drunken slob?" Now the light wasn't on her glasses and I could see the tears glittering in her eyes.

"Hold it, Jane," I said. "A helpless old bitch—are you talking about a dog?"

She nodded. "Mignon, my poodle. She's fifteen years old and maybe she's blind and sick and a nuisance but —but nobody has a right to— I warned Nels that if he touched her I'd kill him and I will."

She started for the door again and I blocked her way, holding her by the shoulders, with an eye on those pruning shears. "We're not here about your poodle, Jane," I said. "It was Millicent who died and we're pretty sure it was cyanide that killed her."

The big shears fell to the floor with a thump. I felt Jane go limp and for a second I thought she'd fainted but after that first slump she braced herself again. She kept her head down for perhaps fifteen seconds and when she brought it up again her face still showed traces of deep pain, no matter how hard she tried to hide it. She thought over what I'd said and gradually her hard-boiled shell closed over the crack I'd made in it. She curled one corner of her mouth.

"And the best I can come up with is the corny alibi about somebody stealing my cyanide a couple of days ago," she said in a flat voice. She hunched her shoulders under the loose sweater and gave a harsh laugh. "Oh, I'm your pigeon, all right, Amos. You've probably heard how Millicent and I had a ringading fight the last time I saw her and now you say she's dead by cyanide poisoning and I'm the only one on the grounds who owned any cyanide or even dared touch the stuff and the best I can come up with is that somebody stole it."

"What was the fight over, Jane?" I asked.

"Why, that no-good roundheel—" she began, and then remembered Millicent was dead. She shook her frowsy head and started over. "This will probably slay you but it was over a man." Her round glasses swung up at me. "Big laugh, huh?" she asked. "Jane, the gorilla girl they always wanted to hide when company was coming, descending to Millicent's level to fight over a man. I don't blame you for laughing; I was pretty disgusted with myself. But believe it or not, at this age I suddenly find myself equipped with all the female instincts and urges I should have had at twelve or thirteen." She gave another harsh laugh. "An old maid and I find myself thinking and acting like some of the drippier sorority sisters I had when Aunt Harriet sent the four of us to State, a thousand years ago."

"Who was the man you and Millicent tangled over?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Nobody you know."

"Gil Harris, perhaps?"

Her dirt-smudged face was a mask; if it was Gil whom she and her sister had fought over, she wasn't telling me. "Never heard of him," she said. She looked back at the bench, then up at me again. "Are you going to haul me off to jail for Millicent's murder?" she asked. "If not, I'd like to get back to work."

I saw Henry's face register dismay; he was appalled to find that this fellow bonsai-devotee could take her sister's murder so matter-of-factly when a moment before she'd been ready to kill somebody she'd thought had put her old poodle out of its misery. I knew that Tim Tilson must be almost as shocked as Henry and perhaps even the veteran sergeant Les Hart was wondering what kind of a weirdie we were dealing with. I could have told them all that Jane Richards would rather die on the rack than admit to the softness I'd glimpsed for those few seconds. Her strange code allowed her to lavish affection, even inhumane possessiveness, on a dog but somewhere along the line she'd fastened to the idea that to admit love for another human being was a weakness that invited hurt.

(Olivia and I had talked about Jane's attitude a couple of times. Olivia's theory had been that of all the sisters, Jane had considered the tragic death of her mother and father a personal outrage; fate or God had robbed her of the two people she loved best so she would never love anyone again and thus would protect herself against any more injustices.)

"I don't think I need haul you off to jail," I said, after the long pause. "You can tell Sergeant Hart here all about your cyanide, where you bought it and when it disappeared and anything else he might want to know. You can work while you're answering his questions; I wouldn't want your little trees to suffer."

She swung back to the bench and picked up a tiny pair of snips. "I don't know anything," she muttered. "I'll tell him about the damn cyanide but I don't know anything about anything else."

I walked to the door and at the last minute I threw the question I'd been saving at her.

"Oh, by the way, did the chauffeur drive Aunt Harriet to the beach this morning or was it the nurse, Mrs. Keogh?"

"Maggie's Drawers" waved over the target; a complete miss. Jane said, "How the hell would I know? And even if I did, d'you expect me to play fink for you about my dear old auntie's little excursions?"

She turned from the bench then, grinning. "Why don't you ask Aunt Harriet—or better yet, ask your beloved Olivia. She'd be the logical one to give you all the scoop; she's probably panting to rat on the whole tribe, just for old times' sake."

And added: "Or are you scared she might make a slip of the tongue and land herself right at the top of the list, Suspect Number One?"

Chapter Three

I.

While I was waiting for Olivia and her husband to come back to Cedar Hill (Huston had tracked them down by phone, finally locating them at the Yacht Club) I sat in the library and tried to figure out what we had that was worth keeping and what we could throw away, if anything.

Item: Millicent Richards had died in Gil Harris' beach shack, presumably from cyanide. Item: The poison had been contained in a Thermos of martinis prepared by her sister, Meredith, for her own consumption. Item: Millicent had stolen the Thermos along with Meredith's picnic supper. Obvious Conclusion: The poison had been intended for Meredith.

There was one big *but* here, though: Millicent had to be pretty drunk to miss smelling the almond odor given off by hydrocyanic acid, cyanide of potassium, prussic acid, or whatever other form of cyanide the lab would find in the vacuum; and Meredith wouldn't have been drunk when she uncorked the martinis at that beach affair.

Before he finished questioning Jane, Les Hart had found out that the cyanide she used in her tree-dwarfing hobby was Scheele's acid, containing 4 to 5 percent hydrocyanic acid, especially lethal stuff. Les had the name of the supplier; checking that would be easy enough. According to Jane, the acid was kept on a workroom shelf in a small dark-blue bottle plainly labeled with the usual death's heads and red *poison* signs. She said she last remembered seeing it on Wednesday, the day before Millicent dropped in on Harris, according to Gil's story. Chances of finding the missing bottle were definitely poor.

Jane had quarreled with Millicent over an unidentified man just before Millicent had left home. Gil said Millicent had said she'd been so upset by something that happened at Cedar Hill that she'd had to get away before she "blew her stack and did something she might be sorry for," still quoting the bronzed beach boy. Was Jane, in her weird way, so crazy mad at Millicent's poaching on this, Jane's first love affair, that she could— No; I couldn't buy that. Jane might go for Millicent with those pruning shears but I couldn't see her using her own cyanide to kill Millicent, and never in such a devious way as doping Meredith's cocktails in the way-out possibility that Millicent would somehow feel impelled to steal Meredith's lunch basket.

Item: Meredith was convinced Olivia had tried to kill her, apparently with a view to becoming executrix of the Richards estate and getting control of the big money. But even if I could imagine my Olivia poisoning her own sister, the question arose again of how she could expect Meredith to gulp down a martini that smelled funny? Or did the almond odor seem stronger to me because I was expecting it; would somebody who had no reason to suspect the drinks were doctored have noticed it over the smell of the gin and vermouth?

Item: There was damp sand on Aunt Harriet's shoes. W.E.G. (Wild-Eyed Guess): she'd been at Harris' cottage somewhere around the time Millicent died. S.S.R. (Stern Self-Reproval): What are you, a mail-order detective or something, Burke?

For in the matter of Aunt Harriet's sandy shoes, let me confess that I'd come close to breaking my own Burke's Law by jumping to a conclusion, something I'd have given one of my men hell for doing. Because Millicent died in a beach shack I'd half assumed the sand on Harriet's shoes came from that same beach. Of course, it could have come from anywhere along a fifty-mile stretch of beach easily accessible to our fair city. As a matter of fact, Cedar Hill was a big place and it was entirely possible that somewhere on the estate there was a sandy spot: Aunt Harriet might have picked up that sand during a tottery constitutional on the grounds, clinging to the arm of her nurse. I could check that out with Huston or Mrs. Keogh, and rather than sit there in the library, spreading my already sizable keister, I could do that right now.

I was getting out of the deep chair in which I'd held this unrewarding little communion with myself, when the man I intended to see, Huston, appeared in the library with a jack phone in his hand. "Telephone call for you, Captain Burke," he said. "A Lieutenant

McLeod." He crossed the room, stooped to put the jack in the wall plug, then handed the phone to me.

"Thanks," I said. "Stick around a minute, Huston. There's something I want to ask you."

"Yes, sir. I'll be back as soon as I hang up the phone in the hall, sir," he said, and went out.

"Hello, George," I said. "Hold it a second till they hang up the other phone." I waited until there was the rattle of Huston's phone being set in its cradle and then I said, "Shoot."

"The complete autopsy just came up," he told me. "Thought you'd want to know right away. It was hydrocyanic acid, all right. The girl swallowed about four milliliters, about three times the deadly dose. Those martinis were loaded with enough poison to kill a hundred Millicents. It's Scheele's acid, the same stuff Les said the sister uses on her flowers or whatever they are. The lab says that whoever fancied up the martinis must have emptied nearly the whole bottle in the jug."

"Taking no chances," I said. "Perhaps the killer didn't know how potent cyanide is."

"Yeah, or maybe he or she did know and wanted it to look like the work of somebody who didn't know."

"Let's not get into that," I said. There was the sound of a door closing behind me and I turned to see Huston come back into the room. "Does the autopsy's estimated time of death fit in with Harris' story?"

"Pretty well. You know how the poison works, Amos; death within a couple of seconds. Harris said Millicent drank the martini sometime between eleven and eleven-thirty—he wasn't sure. The lab estimates death at between ten-thirty and twelve-thirty. That's as close as they usually can say in a PM."

"Any unusual bruises, George?" I asked. "I didn't see any when I looked at the body but it's been mentioned that Harris might have beat up on Millicent occasionally."

"Nothing like that in the report. But there was something you might be interested in knowing." A pause. "Millicent was almost six months pregnant."

In the silence that followed George McLeod's announcement, I heard a faint moan and then the muted click of a receiver being replaced. So somebody who'd been listening over one of Cedar Hill's extensions was in on Millicent's secret, too.

If it was a secret. There was always the chance that it had been a known fact so dangerous to somebody that Millicent had been silenced by murder.

George hadn't missed the tiny moan. He said something under his breath and then told me, "I'm slipping. I should have come out there with the report."

"Yeah, you should have," I agreed. "But I should have my head examined for not remembering there are about a dozen extensions in this place. I goofed, George, not you. But you'd better hold anything else you've got until I come in. God knows how many other big ears are still on the line."

I hung up and turned to Huston, who was looking distressed at the idea that any of his people would stoop so low as to eavesdrop on a telephone conversation. Poor Huston; he'd remained the epitome of correctness all these years while all about him "his people" had gone to hell in a handbasket—the sleep-around, Olivia the husband-switcher, Meredith the nudie metaphysicist, and Jane the misfit who used four-letter words. Looking at him, I wondered how he'd stood it over the years, why he'd remained so loyal to the Richardses. Was the pay that good (oh, unworthy thought) or did he still love the quads in spite of what they'd become?

"Sit down, Huston," I said. "Have a cigarette?"

He looked shocked, as I might have known he would. "Oh, no, thank you, sir," he protested. "I don't smoke, sir."

"Well, sit down, anyway," I told him. "This might take a little while."

He gingerly perched about half an inch of his butt on the edge of an uncomfortable Queen Anne chair and primly clasped his bony old hands on his bony old knees. His protuberant faded eyes regarded me with a mixture of fear and brave resolve: I was The Law, with terrible powers vested in me, but at the same time he had his people to protect from the shameful consequences of their own folly, and that duty came first.

I hated to bring up a personal claim but I had to break down the wall he threw up between us. (*The niceties of personal ethics can and sometimes must take an awful beating in criminal investigation:* Burke's Law.)

When I'd been Olivia's best-beloved, Huston had come to me with an apologetic plea; a nephew of his, a newly married young man named William Rennick, had played sucker for a shakedown. The squeeze was getting to be more than Rennick could stand and and Huston wondered if I with my police connections (oh, yes, Huston had known I was planning on becoming a cop even if Olivia and the others hadn't) could do anything about it. Without any publicity, of course; the least holler and the nephew would lose his bride.

I said I'd do what I could and it had been easy. Rennick had cooperated with names, dates and places. George McLeod, my good friend and mentor, had got the Blackmail Detail on the job in a hurry. The shakedown gal and her boy friend with the naughty candid camera had been grabbed in a staked-out payoff. Both were two-time losers so they were shipped off on parole violation raps without Rennick's name being mentioned.

I hated to have to trade on an old favor that had been so easy, but I asked, "How's your nephew doing these days, Huston? What was his name—Rennick?"

It worked, of course. "Very well, sir—thanks to your kindness when he had his trouble that time."

"Glad to hear it," I said. "I remember you called me a friend in need that time, Huston. Can you still think of me as a friend in this new trouble?"

He thought awhile and asked, "Are you still a real friend of this family, Captain Burke? After the way things turned out between Miss Olivia and you?"

"That was a long time ago," I recited. "I've had plenty of time to get over any resentments I might have felt then."

"But have you gotten over your—ah—heartbreak, sir?" the old man persisted. "Pardon me for mentioning it, but you've never married, have you? Perhaps it's not my place to say so, but I'd think that a gentleman in your position would have found somebody a long time ago. Unless you're still in love with—but of course that's your own affair."

This wasn't going the way I'd intended it to go at all. "Just take my word for it that I haven't any grudge against the family or any member of the family, Huston," I said, perhaps a little too firmly. "I'm a police officer now and a woman's been killed. We've got to find out who killed her and why. It would be the same if she were plain Mary Jones, not Millicent Richards."

"Yes, sir." In a tone of utter disbelief.

"But it *was* Millicent, whom you loved, and you can either cooperate in helping us find Millicent's killer or you can refuse to cooperate and so possibly help the murderer get away with it," I went on. "Which will it be?"

He looked down at his hands for a long moment and then up at me again. "Just one question, sir, if I may," he said. "Are you sure Miss Millicent was murdered?"

He'd leveled with me; I had to level with him. "Not absolutely sure," I said. "She could have committed suicide. Is that what you think, Huston?"

He was looking at his hands again and when he spoke it was in a low voice, infinitely sad. "I suppose I knew Miss Millicent better than anybody else, Captain Burke. She used to talk to me; I was her father confessor when she was a little girl. Lately—well, lately she didn't come to me so often but still she talked to me more than she would to her sisters or to Miss Harriet."

He shook his head. "She was an unhappy child and an unhappy woman, Captain Burke, even though she always tried to appear gay—too gay, most times. Sometimes—sometimes when her spirits were very low she spoke of doing away with herself." He hesitated and went on with an effort. "It's a terrible thing to have to say, Captain Burke, but knowing her as well as I did, I can tell myself yes, Miss Millicent killed herself, but I can't bring myself to think that—well, let's say I can't imagine the alternative you seem to be proposing."

That was easy enough to understand. Millicent was dead and as much as it might grieve Huston to think of her doomed to a suicide's grave, that was an infinitely better solution of her death than the thought that she might have been killed by one of her own sisters. And why couldn't Huston be right? Why couldn't Millicent have stolen Jane's cyanide, then dumped the poison in the martinis she'd swiped from Meredith, somewhere between Cedar Hill and Harris' place? She might even have planned to use the poison in the bottle of beer Huston said she was looking for in the refrigerator; when she saw Meredith's lunch basket with its Thermos, she might have acted on a devilish impulse, some twisted need to avenge herself or merely on a half-drunken urge to involve somebody else in her last desperate gesture.

I found myself hoping that this would prove to be the eventual truth, that none of the others (but of course I was thinking mainly of Olivia) was connected in the least way. But—and how I despise the pat phrase—I had a job to do as Captain of Homicide and there were too many angles blocking such an easy out.

I told Huston, "If it was suicide we'll prove it was, and I can promise you the whole thing will be kept as quiet as possible. But if it was something else, we'll find that out, too, with or without your help, Huston. And if we have to grind it out the hard way, the papers are bound to play it up big. You don't want that to happen, do you?"

No, he didn't want that to happen. In spite of all the scandal that had touched at least two of the quads, Huston still shuddered at the thought of more headlines. "What was it you wanted to know?" he asked after a long pause.

"How much does Miss Harriet get around?" I asked. "I know she was out today because there was wet sand still sticking to her shoes when I talked with her. Where was she this morning? Who was with her or was she by herself?"

He swallowed hard and for a second I thought he was going to button up, but he finally came through. "Miss Richards persists in slipping away at times in spite of her doctor's strict orders. This morning, after Miss Millicent ran out again, we—Mrs. Swenson and I, that is—felt that Miss Harriet should be informed. She'd asked that Miss Millicent be sent to her as soon as she returned, you know. We asked Miss Meredith to tell her aunt what had happened and she did. A few minutes later I happened to see the small car, the Volkswagen, go down the driveway with Miss Harriet at the wheel."

"She was alone?"

He nodded dismally. "Of course, she shouldn't drive," he said. "Even when she was well and—ah—possessed of all her faculties, Miss Harriet was a very erratic driver. When we had the electric brougham she was always running into something or backing over somebody and—but that's beside the point."

I told myself it was no wonder our traffic-accident statistics stayed up there when ancient invalids like Aunt Harriet went tootling about the countryside.

"I took it upon myself to chide Mrs. Keogh about this," Huston was saying, "but she explained that Miss Harriet had slipped out while she—ah—was in the bathroom." The old boy was embarrassed by the indelicate implications but he kept on bravely. "I alerted Miss Meredith about her aunt's—escape, you might say, and suggested we notify the police so she could be stopped before she had an accident, but Miss Meredith vetoed that suggestion. She said—well, she thought it unwise to notify the authorities."

"What did Meredith say?" I asked.

He had trouble getting it out but it finally came. "She was upset, naturally, and of course she didn't mean it, but she said something about letting her aunt smash herself up if she wanted to, she couldn't be bothered with chasing after her because she had her yoga exercises to do." He reviewed what he'd said and went a shade paler, aghast at his disloyalty to one of his people. "Of course, she didn't mean it, sir," he said again.

"Of course not," I said. "And Miss Harriet obviously didn't fold up the VW."

"No, sir. She came back about an hour and a half later. She came up the drive at a terrific speed and managed to stop only by running into a corner of the porte cochere. She wasn't hurt but she seemed terribly distraught. When I helped her out of the car I started to say something about the risk she ran, violating doctor's orders this way. She told me to shut up, sir." His mouth slanted up at one corner. "Miss Harriet has great spirit, Captain Burke, in spite of her age and her infirmities."

I nodded, trying to figure out where Aunt Harriet had gone on her wild ride and why she'd made it. Henry had driven us from Harris' beach place to Cedar Hill in something like twenty-five minutes, which meant that the ordinary driver would need from half an hour to forty minutes to cover the distance. Even if she ran red lights and stop-street signs, as was probable, Aunt Harriet would have needed at least an hour for the round trip between Cedar Hill and the shack. That would give her up to half an hour at the scene. Yet our first coverage of the area hadn't come up with anybody who'd noticed anything unusual that morning around Gil's place—and who could have missed an old lady driving up like crazy in a Volkswagen and then either snooping around or storming into Gil's house to lay claim to her wandering niece?

"Is there any place on the grounds here where the soil's very sandy?" I asked Huston. He thought awhile and had to say no, as much as he would have liked to say yes.

"Do you know where Miss Meredith was going this evening?" I asked the butler. "I mean, the place where her school or whatever it's called holds its picnics?"

He seemed surprised. "Didn't you know, sir?" he asked. "It's the old Richards beach house, sir. There was quite a bit of resentment among the girls when Miss Meredith leased it to the—ah—society, but as she pointed out at the time, the family almost never used the beach house and of course as executrix she had a legal right to lease the property, even for a dollar a year."

I remembered the beach house, a Victorian monstrosity that old Angus Richards had built on Lighthouse Point, then as now an assortment of deserted dunes laced with tidewater creeks that smelled ripe and bred millions of mosquitoes. The quads had abhorred the place when I'd been around and little wonder; the last time I'd seen it, the house was right out of a Charles Addams cartoon. Still, I could imagine Meredith's three sisters raising hell over her dollar-a-year gift of the old ruin to her nutty club, Alan Steiner's "metaphysical research" gang, who went in for nudism on the side.

Lighthouse Point lay almost exactly as far south of Cedar Hill as Gil Harris' place lay north. In other words, Aunt Harriet could have picked up her sand at either place.

"Jane told us that Millicent and she had a battle over a man on Thursday, when Millicent left the house," I said. "Who was the man, do you know?"

"Miss *Jane,* sir?" he asked me. He sounded genuinely amazed. "Why, no, Captain Burke, I don't know anything about it. Are you sure it was Miss *Jane* who had a falling-out with Miss Millicent over a gentleman?"

"Why, was Millicent tangling with another sister over a man?" I asked.

He hesitated a fraction of a second and then said, "No, but—well, I'm surprised to hear that Miss Jane is interested in a gentleman, to be frank. She's never been partial to gentlemen friends, you may recall, sir."

I fastened on that little hesitation and let Huston have it without dressing it up—or at least I started to let Huston have it. "All right, so Millicent was fighting with one of her sisters over a man. Was it the baby's father? She talked to you; did she give you the name of the man who got her pregnant? Was that the reason—"

I should have known what would happen. Huston was an old man, after all, and he'd been under a great strain, both from grief over Millicent's death and worrying about another of his people turning out to be a murderer. I'd had him on the griddle too long and this last thing was more than he could stand.

He closed his eyes and gave a sigh before he began toppling off that straight-backed chair in a dead faint. I got to him in time to keep him from falling and I stood there, propping him up and calling myself all kinds of a heel for what I'd done.

Then came a cool, well-remembered voice from the hall doorway.

"I hope giving poor old Huston the third degree has made you very happy, Amos," Olivia said. "Now would you like to use your rubber hose on me?"

2.

I looked over Huston's sagging head and felt like a schoolboy caught cribbing. "I'm sorry," I said. "I wouldn't have had this happen for the world, but I had to—I mean—"

And stopped, my jaw flapping like the village idiot's, as Olivia came across the room to push past me and cradle the old butler's head against her with a sort of poignant tenderness. Huston was beginning to come to, his eyelids fluttering. Finally he discovered where he was, who owned this softness his head was pressed against. He looked up at Olivia and tried to struggle out of the chair.

"I'm all right," he protested faintly. "I don't know what got into me, Miss Olivia. It's the first time this ever happened to me."

"It's the first time you've ever been bullied by a big, strong policeman," Olivia said acidly. "I'm sorry I wasn't home, Huston; it would never have happened if I'd been here."

She looked toward the door and said, "Nels, take Huston to his room and make him lie down. If he needs a doctor, call—"

"No, no, Miss Olivia," the butler said. "I'm all right. I was just a bit faint, that's all."

He got up, wavered for a moment and then headed for the door, Olivia at one arm. A big man with bright-blond hair and a square, weathered face that showed a flush beneath its tan met them halfway to the door and took over from Olivia. She stood, straight and slender, incredibly lovely still, and watched her current husband, Nels Manning, lead Huston out of the library. Then she turned to face me.

For some crazy reason the thought struck me that a child born on the day I'd last seen Olivia would be going to junior high school today—high school if he or she were even a little precocious—and yet here was the same girl who'd refused to pick up that engagement ring on April the eighteenth, 1950. Reading about Olivia, hearing about her, I'd subconsciously prepared myself to see some woman whose physical appearance had changed as completely as her personality; either she would have become hard-faced and hard-eyed or she'd reappear as an overripe caricature of the real Olivia, gone slack in sensual extravagances, the fine fiber destroyed by self-indulgence. Now I discovered that Olivia showed no outward sign of change. Fourteen years and five (or was it six?) husbands later, she was still the closest thing to feminine perfection in my book.

Her voice had changed, though; it was brittle, almost totally devoid of emotion, when she said, "I heard about Millicent. I suppose that's why you're here, browbeating the servants."

I got over being the tongue-tied schoolboy. I looked into Olivia's gray eyes and forced myself to remember that here was the woman accused directly (by Meredith's blurted word) and by inference of trying to murder Meredith and killing Millicent by mistake. It wasn't easy and I don't mean to say I regarded Olivia as I would have some strange woman who was a murder suspect, but I managed to sound pretty official, the cop and not the ex-fiancé.

"You sound as though hearing about Millicent was just one of those things," I cracked. "Others haven't shown your extraordinary self-control."

"I can imagine the scene Meredith staged for you," Olivia said acidly. "I always said she should have tried the stage. And Aunt Harriet, did she go into hysterics? And Jane?"

"No hysterics," I said soberly, "but they were pretty shook up. Even Jane, although she tried not to show it. How come you're able to take it in your stride, Olivia? I remember you being overprotective, if anything, where Millicent was concerned. Of course, that was a thousand years ago."

She walked to a silver canister sitting on a refectory table, opened it and took out a cigarette. "A million years ago," she said in the clipped voice. "And I'm sorry I disappointed you by not collapsing when I heard the news. That would have pleased you, wouldn't it, watching me tear my hair and beat my breast? Retribution. People who don't admire Captain Amos Burke of the Police Department always pay in the end, even by having their baby sister killed."

She snapped a tall table lighter and puffed clouds of smoke, drawing fiercely at her cigarette. "I always thought of Millicent as a baby sister, you know," she told me, "even though she was born a few minutes before me. Everybody did, and actually she was the oldest of the four."

She swung around, her beautiful mask in place, and walked to the Queen Anne chair Huston had nearly fallen from, sat down and crossed her legs. She was wearing a sheath dress and there had been a time when Olivia would have made adjustments to cover her exposures, no matter how delightful they might be to the masculine eye, but not now. "Would you mind making this as brief as possible?" she asked coolly. "Aunt Harriet has sent word she wants to see me. As a matter of fact, I'd have gone straight up there if I hadn't heard you giving poor old Huston the third degree."

"Through the library door?" I asked. "What good ears you have, grandma."

"Oh, I was eavesdropping," she said lightly. "One of the maids told me you had Huston in here so I put my ear to the keyhole. Actually."

"So you heard me say Millicent was pregnant," I said. "Was that news to you?"

She looked at the end of her cigarette, then shrugged. "I didn't know she was, if that's what you mean, but I wasn't demolished by the news, either. You see, it's happened before."

"Oh," I said. It was the best I could manage.

"What could you expect?" Olivia went on, still in that brittle voice. "Millicent was careless even when she was sober, which wasn't too often in these past few years." She looked at me, her mouth crooked. "And to relieve your puritanical misgivings, she lost her little—babies naturally in the first month or so of pregnancy each time. It seems that Millicent wasn't meant for motherhood. Who says Nature doesn't look out for the species?"

"Maybe Nature slipped up this time," I said. "The postmortem showed she was almost six months gone."

"What?" Olivia shrieked the word. Her poise collapsed and for that moment she was a shaken woman, her defenses down, astonishment and something that could have been anger or fear staring at me from those gray eyes. "She couldn't be! You're lying!"

Then she caught herself—the cold, untouchable Olivia Richards Manning yelling like a shoplifter grabbed by a store detective—and jammed the cigarette in her mouth, dragged at it. The old icily unemotional voice was back when she said, "I'd think that even the police would have to junk any silly murder theory if that were true. Poor Millicent depended on those misses once too often and she couldn't face what was coming; isn't that fairly obvious?"

"Perhaps," I said, "but it raises an interesting possibility. I can find out from Bill Garrabrandt but maybe you'll tell me: what provision did your father's will make for his future grandchildren?"

"Grandchildren! You don't think an illegitimate child of Millicent's would stand any chance to inherit, do you?"

I said, "A grandchild is a grandchild. In this case, considering the fact that none of the sisters has had any children and that you're all—well, not exactly debs, Millicent's child might very well have been the *only* grandchild. If it had been permitted to be born, that is."

The library door opened and Nels Manning called from the threshold, "What's all this about grandchildren, Captain?"

Another keyhole listener, apparently. He walked toward us, and while he didn't stagger or have a mushy tongue, I could see he was loaded. He was a big man, as I've said, but it wasn't until he got close to me that I saw how big he was and what a ruin he'd made out of what once must have been a monumental physique. His shoulders were still broad, he still walked straight and tall, but on close inspection the bright-blond hair proved to be fronted by a cleverly made hairpiece. He wore a melon under his belt, his eyes were pouched, his tanned face was sagged and lined by years of dissipation. Despite all this, when he smiled he still showed the remains of a charm that must once have been something.

His hand came out as he reached me and his grip was the too hearty squeeze of a man who felt a need to impress another with the immediate fact that he was a right guy. "So you're Captain Amos Burke," he said. "I've read and heard a lot about you, of course."

"And you must be Nels Manning," I said. "I've heard about you, too—from your friend Gil Harris."

He started a glance toward Olivia to see how she took mention of Harris' name, then decided against it. "Harris?" he asked. "You mean Millicent's surfing sweetie? Can't say I know him. Met him a couple of times with Millicent, that's all."

Olivia said in a weary voice, "Oh, Nels, don't try to disown your strange friendship with Millicent's suntanned stallion. Remember, this is the famous Captain Burke; he's sure to find out sooner or later that you introduced him to Millicent."

Manning's unhealthy flush deepened a bit before he shook off his resentment and widened his smile. I got the idea that since he'd married Olivia he'd learned to shrug off plenty of these little wifely disloyalties. "The truth will out, eh, Captain?" he asked me airily. "All right, I know Harris. He was an instructor at a health resort I went to a while back."

"A drying-out joint, to be specific," Olivia drawled. "My husband has developed a terrible allergy to booze, Amos—or did you know that, too?"

I wondered silently how Manning could put up with this sort of treatment but then I looked again at his sports coat and slacks, his shoes, his Viyella shirt with its foulard scarf, and estimated the ensemble at close to seven hundred dollars, not counting the Perregaux chronometer on his wrist or the bar bill he'd undoubtedly left behind at the yacht club, where this precious couple had been located. *The things some people won't do for a buck,* I marveled silently. And heard Les Hart's grunt somewhere in the background: the good sergeant has repeatedly accused me of downgrading the importance of money because I'd lucked into so much of it, and maybe he has something there. So Nels Manning wanted to live the life of a rich drunk; so he didn't think the cost prohibitive.

"Aunt Harriet said Gil once applied for the job of family chauffeur," I said. "Was that your idea, Manning?"

Olivia answered for her husband. "No that was Millicent's happy inspiration and Meredith and Jane—not I—went along with it. Of course, Aunt Harriet threw him out. Even if she hadn't seen what was going on, Millicent trying to move one of her playmates into Cedar Hill, I understand that Harris spoiled his chances, if any, by being rude to Aunt Harriet, positively insulting."

"Well, he hangs ten," I explained. "I imagine that would give a man a superiority complex."

Olivia didn't ask me what it meant to "hang ten"; either she knew or she thought it was TV police talk, like "ten-four," and she couldn't be bothered. "Is Harris in jail?" she asked instead.

"We're holding him as a material witness," I explained.

Manning stirred uneasily and muttered something about it being silly to think Gil would hurt a fly, and Olivia said sharply, "Don't let your fondness for the impossible creature give you any ideas about putting up his bail, dear boy. The last time I checked, you'd overdrawn your allowance up to sometime next November."

"Only August, my dear," Nels Manning said mildly.

I was tired of hearing this new Olivia expand on her bitchiness. I said, "I was talking to Garrabrandt a while back and your name was mentioned, Olivia."

She eyed me carefully. "Should I be flattered or not?"

I shrugged. "I was thinking about something Bill said about your financial position."

That jarred her off her perch. "He doesn't know a thing about it," she flared. "How dare he discuss my affairs with an outsider? Criminally unethical and—" She stopped and her eyes narrowed. "What is this?" she asked slowly. "Bill isn't one to gossip about his clients' affairs, even if he thought there was something wrong. Which there isn't, of course."

"So you are in hock up to your lovely neck, are you?" I asked. Before she could let me have it, I went on. "No, Bill didn't say you were; as a matter of fact he said you had more money than you could possibly spend in your lifetime. But somebody else implied that you needed more than your allowance from the estate and needed it badly."

"Meredith?" she asked. "Aunt Harriet? Huston?" I didn't answer so she spent more time than she needed grinding her cigarette out in a tray. When she spoke her voice was low and thoughtful. "I'm beginning to see where this is leading, Amos," she said. "I need some quick money which Meredith won't let me have out of my principal and so I turn Lucrezia Borgia and begin poisoning my sisters off so I'll get the whole pot; is that it?"

"Olivia, for God's sake!" Manning exclaimed.

Her gray eyes watched mine. "That was what you were driving at, wasn't it?" Again I refused to answer and again she went on after a pause. "It's a vile suggestion but I don't suppose anything's too vile for the police intellect. There happens to be two things basically wrong with your theory, Captain. First, I happen to love my sisters—after my fashion—and secondly, even if I could murder them for money, why Millicent, of the three of them? Why not Meredith? If I killed her I'd become executrix under that fantastic will Father left and I'd have a free hand to—"

"After your fashion," I broke in. "Do you ever speak of love or write about it or even think about it without adding that qualifying phrase, Olivia?"

She looked puzzled. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"I recently saw a photograph you'd inscribed 'To So-and-So, with all my love—after my fashion,' " I explained.

"Look here," Nels Manning huffed, "you may be a big wheel with the police but that doesn't give you the right to go through my room."

"I didn't," I said.

"You must have. I've got a picture of Olivia on my dresser that says that." He thought of another explanation and turned to his beautiful wife. "Unless you've been scattering your new pictures around and about, my love," he added.

"Nels." She said just that one word but it was enough to remind Manning who he was and what he'd be if she decided to try for six husbands (or would it be seven?).

His apology poured out in a fearful babble. "Sorry, darling, but this thing about Millicent—it's knocked the hell out of me, if you must know. I'm not responsible for what I'm saying, actually. After all, I was very fond of Millicent and my nerves—"

"Oh, go suck on your bottle," Olivia interrupted. "You've got a good excuse this time, this sudden affection for Millicent. As if you ever needed an excuse. And seeing that I won't need you until Monday afternoon—we're due at the Evans' at five—why don't you run down to your club till this is all over? I don't think I could stand a maudlin drunk around while we deal with Amos and his merry men."

"I believe I will," Manning said, nodding. He looked at me. "All right with you, Burke? You can always find me at the Porthos if you need me."

"If you want any intelligent answers you'd better see him there before noon," Olivia said harshly. "The Porthos bar opens at eight, even on Sundays, and dear Nels is usually well on his way by ten."

Manning was so anxious to get to his bottle that he seemed not to hear his wife's crack. He nodded to me and headed for the door.

"Be sure it's the Porthos Club," I called after him. "If you change your plans call my office at headquarters and let us know."

He nodded again and hurried out. Olivia did not turn in her chair to watch him go. As soon as the door closed she asked, "What's this about a photograph I'm supposed to have inscribed?"

"We found a cabinet photo of you at Harris' place with that inscription," I said. "It was addressed to darling Gil so was that 'impossible creature' bit intended for Nels or for me?"

"Harris had a picture of me?" Olivia asked slowly, frowning. "With love from me to *him?*"

"After your fashion. It was mixed in with a lot of other ladies' pictures but they weren't as beautiful or as well-dressed. Most of them weren't dressed at all, as a matter of fact."

She sat there frowning, the long silvered nail of a forefinger tapping the arm of her chair, her upper foot swinging slowly.

"Well?" I asked when the silence stretched on and on.

She shook her head and when she looked up at me she was the Olivia I'd known and loved, just for the briefest while, intelligent, quick-minded, superbly balanced. "I don't know a thing about the picture," she said, "but about Millicent, I wonder. If she really could have children in spite of what—there was that time she went—"

She found herself thinking out loud and pulled up short. The glacier slid down and she was the Ice Maiden again. She got out of her chair in a lithe movement. "I need time," she told me. It was a command, not a request. "If I decide anything I'll get in touch with you."

"Like don't call me; I'll call you? Look, Olivia, amateurs who play detective only mess things up, if they don't get themselves hurt or even dead."

Her look told me that that might apply to ordinary people but not to Olivia Richards Manning.

"You know I could book you on suspicion," I said, "just so you'd tell us what you know or suspect, instead of letting you loose to play Olivia Richards, girl detective. With what I have, booking you for at least twenty-four hours would be a cinch."

She didn't even dignify this with an answer. She smiled at me icily and turned her straight back on me and walked out of the room, leaving Captain Amos Burke of Homicide holding his left ear in his hand, so to speak. Captain Burke didn't try to stop Mrs. Olivia Richards Manning. At the moment, Captain Burke was busy telling his inner voice to pipe down, it was talking what Aunt Harriet would call rubbish, who'd ever heard anything quite so silly as a man still thinking deep thoughts about a female zombie who'd given him the brush nearly fifteen years ago and who'd married five or six husbands since then, not to speak of the battalion of lovers she must have. . . .

"Shut up," I said aloud. I nearly added: *You're speaking of the woman I love.*

3.

Back at my office in the big new headquarters building, which doubtless had been designed by one of Frank Lloyd Wright's undisciplinable castoffs (it was much photographed by tourists and I had to admit it looked spectacularly different from the outside even if it was impossible to heat in winter or air-condition in summer and had such tricky features as the main Men's being walled by clear glass, not frosted, and overlooking our city's main stem), I gathered my trusty cohorts about me and we went over what we had on the Millicent Richards case.

Sitting in on the conference were Lieutenant McLeod, Sergeant Hart, Tim Tilson, a couple of other Homicide men, Jim Arnold and Ed Samlow, who had worked the beach area, and, by invitation, the head of the Vice Squad, Lowell Tracy, and don't ever think you're being funny by calling him "Dick."

Tracy and I had sort of grown up together in the Department although he had made his grade the hard way and my career was what the papers dearly loved to call "meteoric," especially when they had me on the pan about something. Of course, it wasn't meteoric at all: I might have been a multimillionaire's only son, but F. X. Burke would rather cut off his right hand or at least his every-morning three fingers of Irish whiskey than let his dough or position swing any weight in my behalf. F. X., as a matter of fact, had gone purple in the face and hoarse in the voice over my insane resolve to go on the cops instead of coming into the business; for a while it had looked as though he was going to pull an East Lynne and tell me never to darken his door again, but I was my father's son and every bit as hard-headed as he was. Irresistible force pounded against immovable object for years while I was up at Amherst but finally the old boy saw I *had* to go into police work, it was a compulsion with me, and he relented to the point of at least throwing no roadblocks. I entered the Police Academy as just another rookie and neither my father's money nor my education nor my social background did a thing for me: I graduated fifth in my class by working harder than I'd ever worked in my life.

Later, when I made sergeant, then lieutenant, F. X. grew embarrassingly proud of me, and when a corrupt machine administration finally was tossed out and some relatively honest men took over, he predicted I was a cinch for Inspector and even Chief with my record, scored against the odds posted by the politicians for whom I'd done no favors when it would have meant winking, blinking, or nodding at the stern letter of the law. Not that I was exactly a YMCA secretary in most things, but for some reason it went against the grain for me to see an ordinary citizen go to prison while a man with a dirty "in" walked the streets, free as a goddam bird, although he was as guilty as the ordinary slob.

Well, I didn't make Inspector, of course, but I did make Captain of Homicide and F. X. Burke died happy in the conviction that I was the best thing that had come along since they invented policemen. After his death I tried to reconcile myself to quitting the Department to take over the so-called Burke Empire, but I found that my wise old man had trained his associates so well that the operation ran as smoothly as it had when he was in the driver's seat. The Burke Enterprises needed me about as much as they needed a kick in the head; I was advised in almost as many words to keep on being a cop and let the management take care of making the business bigger and better and richer. Which I did and which the management did, year after stock-split and X-dividend year.

But I was talking about Lowell Tracy. He'd had it tougher on the Vice Squad under the old corrupt regime than I'd had it in Homicide, because his beat covered activities dear to the hearts of the hoods who spread the ice—girls and gambling. When the cleanup came, Tracy was a lieutenant, but God only knew how he'd kept his badge, because he'd refused to take and he wouldn't scare, although his so-called force did both. Several years of this frustrating duty had left their scars; Tracy was the most complete cynic I'd ever known and if there was any compassion in the man he hid it well.

Now he sat across the office from my desk, one leg hooked over the arm of his chair, his beat-up hat on the back of his red head, his voice as hard as his face. "I've got a job to do at nine o'clock, Amos," he said, "so let me fill you in first on what you want to know about Steiner and his creeps."

"Shoot, Lowell," I said.

He glanced at the yellow sheet in his hand. "Dr. Alan Steiner, BA, MA, PhD," he said. "That's his real name; he's never used an alias. Two arrests, one conviction. In nineteen fifty-two he was an instructor in English literature at a little college in Michigan and some of the kids' parents squawked about what was going on at his apartment after school hours. They pinned a contributing-to-delinquency on him but of course the papas and mamas chickened out when it came to having their boys and girls go to court, so the DA had to nol-pros.

"The college bought up his contract, he got his doctorate and went to a junior college in Pennsylvania as assistant professor of philosophy. In nineteen fifty-four he landed in the can again, charged with beating up a co-ed in his rooms. Either she refused to play house with him or that was the way he played house; it was never proved which. This time he was convicted but the jerky jury picked the weakest alternative and found him guilty of simple assault. You know juries, Amos. The judge must have been as jerky as the jury because he gave Steiner probation."

He shook his head at the lunacies of judges and juries and went on in that toneless voice of his. "He came here first in nineteen forty-eight, before this other happened. He was an English instructor at State for a while, before they let him out the back door. They didn't want any legislative investigating committees messing around asking questions, so they paid up Steiner's contract—he seems to have made out all right on those paid-up contracts. They told Steiner to leave quietly and he did; we never did find out what the poop was, why they kicked him out.

"Then in nineteen sixty-one he showed up here again with this metaphysical-research bit, financed by Miss Meredith Richards."

"Was she the only sponsor?" I asked.

"Well, no, there were a couple of other rich women who went in with her at first, but when Steiner's treatments didn't change them from old bags into Meredith Richardses overnight, they pulled out. Present membership is a hundred and forty-six, with only eighteen male members, not counting Steiner. We put a lady keek in there, a society-type worker with a good record who we borrowed from another town, but she didn't get us anything we could move in on. The men are all small in the brain and big in other departments, young stuff, beach bums and like that. The women are gals with too much dough and husbands who work so hard making the loot they're too pooped to play the romantic bit when they get home nights. You know the type."

"You've got a membership roster?" I asked.

"Uh-huh, and I know what you're going to ask and sure, that camera snoop, Gil Harris, has worked for Steiner when he's been low on dough. Harris, by the way, has taken only one fall: we got him on a pornography-peddling charge about a year and a half ago but his lawyer proved it was art."

He shook his head again before he went on. "That Steiner's no dope," he admitted. "A week after we put that girl plant in his club he took her aside and told her he knew she was a female cop and if she wanted to stick around, OK, but from there on in the dues were a yard a week, payable in advance. The keek wouldn't do us any good at any price with Steiner knowing who she was, so we hauled her out."

"Just what do they do in that society?" I asked.

"It's hard to explain, exactly," Tracy told me. "Sometimes they sit around and talk philosophy, mostly about isn't it swell that girls are different from boys? Sometimes they have services that are almost religious but not quite, real spooky affairs, according to the plant. Nothing rough enough for a make goes on at the downtown temple; if the gals date the boys on the outside, that's their business and we can't do anything about it. At the beach they run around with their elbows out but there's a high fence around the place and they've even got a state license saying they're a bona fide, nonprofit sunbathers' organization."

"How about sending Tim in there?" Les Hart suggested. "Might get his mind off all those books he reads."

Tracy glared at him: he had no time for humor, feeble or otherwise. "What else do you need, Amos?" he asked me.

"What's the special connection, if any, between Steiner and Meredith Richards?" I asked. "Is he her kept man?"

The Vice Squad captain got a stick of gum out of his pocket and began unwrapping it. "If she thinks he is, she's wrong," he said. "Steiner gets around plenty when she's not looking. For instance, about a year ago, maybe more recently than that, this Millicent Richards was coming in the service entrance of Steiner's apartment house when sister Meredith was going out the front. And a couple of weeks ago a man in Traffic told us he stopped Steiner for speeding and there was this other Richards girl in the car with him. He didn't know which quad it was but from his description it wasn't Meredith or Millicent."

"Was she a—well, the queenly type or on the beatnik side?" I asked.

"The Traffic man told us she was wearing her hair in snarls and she cussed him out real rough. I don't think anybody'd call her the queenly type."

So Jane had been playing with Steiner, too? Was he the man she and Millicent had tangled over, Jane's first lover?

"Y'know," Samlow said thoughtfully, "with the hairdos they're wearing these days and the way a lot of 'em talk that ought to know better, it could have been the queen, at that."

Tracy got up with a snort. "When we start discussing hairdos it's time I got to work," he told me. "Anything else you want that we might have, let me know."

I thanked him and he went out. George McLeod said, "I think we'd better have a talk with Dr. Alan Steiner, don't you, Amos?"

I nodded. "Later. Let's see what else we have here."

First, there were the checkouts on the nurse, Mrs. Keogh, and the rest of the hired help at Cedar Hill, except old Huston: I knew all about him and there wasn't a chance of his having a police file.

Mrs. Keogh had been with Aunt Harriet since her stroke or heart attack, whichever it was, the previous

September. She had no police record, the nurses' registry gave her an A-1-A rating, she'd been sent to attend the old lady by one of our city's most respected physicians. Cross off Keogh.

The servants came through with OK's with the exception of one maid, named Kathleen Donnegan, who'd done a hitch at a girl's reformatory when she was a kid. She'd done fine since and we should have been able to cross her off, too, but one of the bad things about police work is the sad fact that anybody who'd taken a fall, no matter how long ago or how excusable, how fully atoned for since, can't be crossed off in a murder investigation. This Donnegan girl was not bad-looking and she still had the figure that had got her in trouble in the first place, so she had to be put through the grinder, in as nice a way as we could manage.

Les said, "About the Thermos bottles at Cedar Hill; believe it or not, there were eight quart vacuum bottles, all nearly identical with the one Millicent brought to Harris' place. Huston showed me the seven that were left, all sitting in a row in a basement closet. Will somebody please tell me why in hell any family, even the Richardses, would need eight quart Thermos bottles?"

"Suppose each of the quads and her date went off on a picnic in different directions," Tim suggested. "Suppose the girls all liked martinis and their boy friends all liked sours. Now suppose—"

"All right, all right, let's stick to business," George McLeod broke in. "Maybe you bachelors can go out on the town at midnight but I'm a family man and my wife is hoping to spend a Saturday evening with me just this once. I've got a line on Nels Manning, Amos; do you want to hear it?"

When I nodded he gave it to me in as few words as possible. Manning was an easterner, Dartmouth '41, an infantry captain during World War II with a Bronze Star and Purple Heart. His family had once had a lot of money and when he was a kid Nels had lived it up, polo, racing yachts and such, but somewhere along the line the money ran out and none of the Mannings seemed to know how to make any more. After the war, Nels fooled around with the market, went in on a Florida real-estate deal that bombed, and eventually arrived in our town in 1949 as a—God save us all—public-relations counselor.

How he met Olivia wasn't clear, but Nels was fast in the getting-acquainted business; he had looks, manners and before the booze grabbed him by the throat he must have been an attractive gent. At any rate, Olivia picked him when she shed her fifth husband, Blaney Wills (so it *was* six, after all), and Nels might have made out fine if he hadn't crawled into that bottle.

"He was picked up a couple of times for DWI," McLeod told me, "and some knothead down in Municipal Court let him off with a fine both times. That was early last year and it was our first notice that Manning was on the heavy sauce. Since then there have been the usual reports that come out of a lush, a disorderly in a bar on Seventh, a fight at the country club—he was suspended for sixty days on that one—and things like that. We keep an eye on him; you know how it is."

I did indeed. Not many people realize it, but when somebody starts gnawing on that bottle too heavily, sooner or later the police jot him down as a person to watch, be he millionaire or shoe clerk, man or woman, old or young. Not that there's any tail put on him or anything like that, but if there's trouble in the ginhead's vicinity the police have a ready-made starting point to begin their work—the alcoholic. How do we get a line on them? We're told by liquor-store proprietors and bartenders and the thousand and one complaints from relatives and neighbors of the lush. Off the DWI arrests, the bar brawl and the country-club fracas, the Department had listed Nels Manning, handsome husband of the rich and beautiful Olivia Richards Manning, along with Joe Stewbum of Skid Row, and wouldn't Manning have been surprised to know that?

"What's Manning's love-life like?" Samlow asked.

McLeod hunched his shoulders. "Like most men on the sauce, he hasn't got time for much extracurricular experimenting. Besides, in his situation even a billy goat ought to have sense enough not to give the baglady an excuse for kicking him out." (Baglady, I hasten to add, is the word for a woman who handles the payoff; it has nothing to do with her physical attributes.)

"Why the question?" I asked the detective.

"Well, when Arnold and I were working the beach, I hit an old gal named Larkin who kept an eye on Harris' place whenever she was there, which was mostly weekends. She said she'd seen this good-looking guy visit Harris a lot. Y'know Gil usually had a couple of chicks hanging around—for photographic and other purposes. I wondered if Manning was the man and if he just liked Harris' company or if he had something going with one of the chicks."

I asked Les, "Have we got any shots of Manning or Steiner?"

"Steiner we've got, off the old mug shots, but we don't have Manning."

"Better get a cut from the *News-Courier* morgue and have the print shop run a few prints," I said. To Samlow I said, "When you get the Manning shots, try him and Steiner on the Larkin woman. Although I can't see why Steiner, with an apartment, a temple and a beach house, would have to go to Harris' place for a bit of fun."

"I can," Tim Tilson argued. "If Steiner's playing around on the side, he doesn't want Meredith to know about it, that's for sure. And where would she be most likely to go if she wanted to check up on her Stee? Why, his apartment, the temple and the beach house, in that order."

"Go to the head of the class," I told him. "Your firm but just leader bows to a keener mind." I looked at my watch and saw it said eight-fifty. "OK," I said. "Unless somebody's got something important, let's knock it off. George wants to get home and I don't see what else we can do tonight."

"How about Steiner?" Tim asked.

"It's a little late to head for Lighthouse Point, even if his bareskin kaffeeklatsch wasn't called off because of what happened to Meredith's sister," I said. "We'll catch up with him tomorrow."

"Unless you've got a heavy date, Captain, you might not have to wait till tomorrow to talk to Steiner," Jim Arnold said. "When Ed and I went out there to look over the joint—the lieutenant's orders—we talked to a caretaker who came down to the gate after we'd banged and hollered for half an hour, it felt like. He said there wasn't any picnic or any other kind of meeting scheduled there tonight. Said the nineteen-five-type water pump broke down and there wasn't a mechanic in the area who could find out how to fix it so they were installing a whole new system. He said if Steiner's crowd was doing anything tonight it'd be at the downtown temple."

I looked at George and he looked back at me in a way that told me he was wondering the same thing I was.

"Tim and I will try the temple, then," I said. "Anything else?"

McLeod gestured at the paper he was holding in one big hand. "I've got the final autopsy report here but you know what it says. Scheele's-acid poisoning, time of death, five months-plus pregnant, the Caesarean scar and—"

"The what?" I yelped.

George looked at me, his eyebrows up. "I told you about that over the phone, didn't I?" He remembered the faint moan that had interrupted our conversation and what had followed. He dropped a heavy word and said, "No, of course I didn't. Well, the autopsy shows that a Caesarean section was performed on the woman quite a long time ago."

To relieve your puritanical misgivings, she lost her little—babies naturally in the first month or so of pregnancy each time. That's what Olivia had told me and now it seemed that either Millicent had done the impossible and had had a baby without Olivia knowing it, or Olivia had been lying to me.

In either case, if that baby lived it was a good bet to be the eventual heir to something like fifty million dollars, give or take a buck or two.

4.

Alan Steiner's "temple" was a made-over mortuary chapel (the original owners had gone on to bigger and better quarters, complete with carillon and "solace hostesses"), which was pretty well filled up when Tim and I eased our way into the back of the place. I've made getting in sound simple but it wasn't. Before we walked into the damnedest assortment of weird lights, eerie music, incense and double-talk I'd ever seen, smelled or heard, we'd had to speak real convincingly to two lobby ushers who undoubtedly were on next Friday night's rassling card.

These two goons decided at first sight that we weren't true devotees of metaphysical research and demanded our membership cards.

"This is a private service," said the spokesman for the pair. "And when I say private I mean like we throw kibitzers out in the street."

I showed him my badge in its leather folder but it didn't make much of an impression. "Cops, huh?" he grunted. "When are you guys gonna get tired of tryin' to get somethin' on the doctor? C'mon, I'll show you the licenses and permits and junk in the office."

"That's another department," I said. "We're from Homicide."

Gus Neanderthal looked at me again. "If it isn't Captain Burke, the millionaire cop!" he exclaimed. "Well, look, you got the wrong address or somethin'. We ain't had no homicides in here for over a coupla weeks, at least."

His partner sniggered and Tim Tilson burned; I could feel the heat.

I was very patient, if I do say it myself. "We're going in there, crumb," I told him in a gentlemanly voice, "even if we have to kick your crotch up into your neck to do it. You wouldn't want to disturb the services with your screaming, would you? So move over; we're coming through."

The ape man and his buddy looked at me and evidently decided I meant it. For a second I thought there was going to be a schmear but finally the more articulate of the two moistened his scarred lips and muttered, "The boss ain't gonna like it if we let you in."

"You ain't gonna like it if you try to keep us out," I said, and they stood aside so Tim and I could walk past them, into the main hall, sanctuary, whatever they called it.

The big room was heavily carpeted and dimly lit so I doubt that anyone knew we'd come in except the man in the pulpit, if it could be called that; it was a dais covered with a purple silk cloth which was gold-embroidered with mystic symbols that would have looked better on Merlin's peaked cap. The man behind this eyeball-filling stand was also clad in purple silk covered with gold symbols. He didn't wear a magician's cap; instead, his head was covered by a handsome cap of gleaming white hair.

The face under the hair was strikingly sensual, even from that distance. The voice that rolled out in a rhythmic beat was sonorous even if the words made no sense at all. Or perhaps the initiated understood everything, even the references to such juicy subjects as *Purusa-sukta* and *Saptabhangi* and *ahamkara.* Whatever Steiner was saying hypnotized his flock, or at least the women among his congregation, who numbered at least 98 per cent of the house. They were all straight out of one of those old Helen Hokinson cartoons and they sat there with glazed eyes and moist mouths, absorbing the wisdom and inspiration and sex appeal that was coming down to them in words of six syllables, none of them intelligible to me. There were a couple of young men in the audience but Steiner wasn't getting through them: he wasn't trying to. Let them yawn and shift their butts on the upholstered pews; the women were the ones with the dough who were paying for this strange kick and the muscle boys' part in the action came later.

I looked for Meredith and couldn't find her. This surprised me in a way, although ordinarily it would have been hard for me to imagine a girl whose sister had been killed that morning joining this foofooraw a few hours later. But I recalled the lofty importance Meredith had attached to "Stee's" yoga exercises, even after she'd just been hit with the news of Millicent's death, and I thought she just might have run to Steiner for consolation and counsel.

I also remembered that when Meredith had stepped back from me after that first convulsive clutch, those few muffled sounds of sorrow, her eyes had been damp but neither red nor swollen. Everything considered in the light of subsequent developments, that was something to bear in mind.

I saw Steiner give us a look when the light from the lobby cracked the gloom of the temple as we opened the door. He kept on with his gobbledygook until he saw us as more than large silhouettes, and when he pegged us for strangers who'd somehow got past his strong-arm boys outside, he obviously guessed who we were and went into the finale ahead of schedule. There was some rustling and murmuring among the rapt ladies, but they evidently figured that The Master must have some good reason for cutting it short, because when he started some business with a silver globe, a lamp and a triangle (don't ask me what he did, exactly, with these three symbols, because things got too confused for even my trick memory), the gals got up, stretched out their arms, knelt down, chanted something that sounded like a prayer said backward, stood up again and—so help me—broke into "God Bless America," led by an organ that was hidden somewhere out of sight.

Call the Steiner Metaphysical Research School a bunch of Commies, huh? Didn't they always open with "My Country 'Tis of Thee" and wind up with "God Bless America"?

When the last all-soprano strains of this stirring Kate Smith anthem died away, Steiner descended from his pulpit and gave the gals a personal blessing as they filed past him and up a side aisle on their way out. A couple of the ladies must have guessed that we were responsible for the bobtailed session, because they gave us dirty looks as they went past, but when Steiner finished with his hand-patting he was all smiling charm as he came up to us, his purple robe flowing after him.

"Ah, gentlemen," he said. "I take it you're from the police? I've been expecting you ever since I heard of the tragic death of Millicent Richards."

"We'd like to ask you a few questions," I said.

"Yes, yes, of course. Anything I can tell you. If you'll step this way we'll go into my adytum, where we won't be disturbed."

I looked at Tim and he said out of a corner of his mouth, "Adytum—the innermost sanctuary."

"Well, thanks," I said humbly, and followed the rustle of Steiner's robe down a hall to a door at its end. The metaphysicist (or is it metaphysician?) unlocked this door with one of a bunch of keys that jangled on a chain he took from under the robe, and he went through the doorway ahead of us, turning on the lights. I'd half expected to find myself surrounded by stuffed owls, skeletons, and bubbling retorts that spouted vapor, but Steiner's "adytum" turned out to be a very comfortable, very masculine study with deep leather chairs, books and eighteenth-century hunting prints. Steiner gestured toward the chairs and went to a closet, in which he hung the rich robe that he shrugged out of. Under the vestments he had on a conservative dark suit; as a matter of fact, everything about Alan Steiner was conservative after he stepped out of that mystic's role—white shirt, dark, small-figured tie, dime-size cuff links, plain black oxfords and dark socks. The effect would have been ministerial if it hadn't been for the man's face; close up, Steiner was about as ministerial as a satyr.

His robe disposed of, Steiner went to the small desk at one end of the study (damned if I was going to call it an adytum, even in my mind) and took a cigar from an enameled canister. He looked at us inquiringly and when we both shook our heads he lit the panatela with a pocket jet lighter and walked over to a chair facing us, lowered himself into it.

"Now then, gentlemen, what can I tell you?" he asked. "Or perhaps I'd first better make sure you *are* from the police, eh?"

"I'm Captain Burke, Homicide," I said. "This is Detective Tilson." The white-haired man nodded. I asked, "How well did you know Millicent Richards, Steiner?"

He didn't seem put out by the fact I hadn't called him "Doctor." He leaned back in his chair, his cigar jutting, and looked at the beamed ceiling. "How well did I know Millicent?" he repeated. "What can I say? You see, Captain, it's a question that demands many considerations. How well does any mortal know any other? How well does a mother know her child or a husband his wife? I was reading a—"

"We'll get along better if you don't go analytical on us, Steiner," I broke in. "When I asked you how well you knew Millicent you knew what I meant. Did you see her often? Did you date her? Were you intimate with her?"

That jolted him a little but he recovered quickly. He gave me one look, then inspected the tip of his cigar carefully. "Y'know, Captain, I could claim the protected secrecy of the confessional."

"You could, but so could a pimp, and he'd make out about as well as you would," I said. "Let's stop kicking this thing around. I've looked at your police record, Steiner, and I didn't like what I saw very much."

He smiled at me through the smoke of his cigar. "I suppose you refer to that unfortunate affair in Pennsylvania," he said smoothly. "I don't expect you to believe me when I tell you that I was—what's the word?—framed."

"By a junior-college co-ed?" Tim asked. "You frame awful easy, don't you?"

Steiner puffed at his cigar, considering the setup, and then asked, "Does this open hostility mean you think I'm connected in any way with Millicent's death?"

"You tell us," I suggested. "Starting with that first question of mine: how well did you know Millicent Richards?"

"Very well, I suppose you'd say. Not as well as I know her sister Meredith, of course, but better than I know her other sisters. As a matter of fact, I don't know Olivia and Jane at all."

"Careful," I warned him.

He flicked me a look and then gave an uncomfortable laugh. "I see you know everything about me, eh? I forgot about the speeding ticket, didn't I? Yes, Jane was with me that night; she'd come here to the temple to—well, to tell me to leave Millicent alone. She was quite—er—loud and profane about it so I suggested a ride someplace where we wouldn't be overheard by my—flock. Jane was so vehement about the whole thing that I promised her I wouldn't see Millicent again and I didn't."

Somehow I believed he hadn't seen Millicent after Jane's call; the oddball sister had a way of scaring stronger men than Alan Steiner. "Before Jane called you were seeing Millicent all the time?" I asked.

"No, not too often. You see, Millicent came to me when she was in deep trouble, asking for my help."

"She came to you?" Tim asked. He sounded shocked.

That bugged Steiner more than anything I'd said. His smile went out and his mellow voice took on a rasp. "Why not? As a matter of fact, who could she go to who was better qualified to listen to her troubles?"

Who, indeed? Aunt Harriet? Huston? Dear Abby?

"When was this and what was Millicent's trouble?" I asked before Tim could say what was on his mind, that he could think of a couple dozen people better qualified to help Millicent if he gave it some thought.

Steiner turned back to me. "It was about—I've forgotten exactly."

"Come on," I said.

"How can I remember dates?" Steiner asked snappishly. "I have women coming to me all the time with their troubles; how do you expect me to remember the exact date the little nympho—" He got hold of himself, drew a deep breath and put the voice needle back in the old deep and mellow groove again. "Congratulate yourselves, gentlemen," he said. "You made me lose my temper and say something for which I'll be eternally sorry."

"I see you have a quick temper," I said. "Was that why you beat up on that little co-ed? Do you like to hurt women, Doctor?"

Never teched him. His smile was back when he drawled, "How many complaints has your excellent police department received about my sadistic tendencies, Captain? Or about anything connected with my personal life—or my professional career?"

"Let's get back to Millicent," I told him. "When did she come to you? Six months ago? A year? Longer ago than that?"

"It was—ah, about three months ago, I think. Of course, I'd met her before then; I'd even had several dates with her."

"When Meredith was out of town," Tim put in.

He nodded serenely. "Oh, yes indeed; you may be sure it was when Meredith was out of town or we both knew she was otherwise engaged. I offer no apologies for dating Millicent behind her sister's back. She needed men, Captain. To put it plainly, Millicent suffered from an overactive estrus."

I'd never run into that exact term before but I knew what he meant. "And as the old saying goes, if you ever turn it down you'll drop dead in the market place before next Tuesday noon," I said.

He shrugged. "Why should I turn it down? I'm no monk and the girl was in torment. If I didn't, somebody else—"

"Sure, sure," I cut in. I cooled my despisal of this heel by reminding myself how close I'd come to taking Millicent up on one of her propositions—and at a time when I was practically engaged to Olivia, too. "So this deep trouble she came to you about was her pregnancy?"

He stared at me and his mask slipped off as I watched him, revealing either a shook-up individual or a damned good actor. He made a false start, cleared his throat and then asked, "She was pregnant? Is that why she killed herself?"

I said, "She was pregnant. We know that but we don't know if she killed herself because of it or even if she killed herself at all."

Steiner's brown eyes grew round. "Do you mean she was murdered?"

"We're not sure of that, either."

"But if she was pregnant—do you mean you think I was to blame?" His voice grew hoarse again. "Perhaps you even suspect me of killing her to keep her from ruining everything between Meredith and me!"

"Do you mean you were afraid Meredith would get sore enough to pull her money out from under this herky-jerky society of yours?" I asked.

He made a gesture that was a contemptuous dismissal of the Steiner School of Metaphysical Research. "That tap has about run its course anyway; to hell with it," he said. "Good riddance, too. If you think it's an easy living to titillate a hundred and twenty-five old bags who want to *feed* on you all the time and—" His voice went a little hysterical before he stopped, shook his head and began again in a calmer tone. "No, I wasn't thinking about the school. I was thinking of my forthcoming marriage to Meredith Richards."

I needed a minute to let that sink in. Was Meredith really planning on making Steiner her Number Two or did the handsome phony just hope she was? I couldn't imagine Meredith the cool one, Meredith the intelligent one, letting this professional libido-tickler con her into marriage but, then, until that morning I couldn't have imagined Meredith naked in Cedar Hill's music room, either, doing yoga exercises because "Stee" said it was good for her untrammeled soul.

I'd seen the gals sit mesmerized during the rites just concluded and I asked myself if it was possible for this white-haired charlatan to charm a whole gaggle of women from fifty feet away, what couldn't he do in the hypnosis department alone and at close quarters with Meredith?

I decided to pigeonhole the Steiner-Meredith nuptials for the time being and went back to Millicent. "What was troubling Millicent if it wasn't the fact that she was pregnant?" I asked.

"She—you've got to understand she was drinking too much, Captain, and people, especially women, get hallucinations when their nerves are shot by liquor. Millicent told me—she said she was afraid one of her sisters was going to—well, do her great harm."

"Like murdering her?" Tim asked.

Steiner tried to wriggle away from the blunt word "murder." "She wasn't that definite," he said. "She was fairly incoherent, anyway, and she couldn't give me any concrete reason for a sister wanting to harm her."

"Which sister did she think was her enemy?" I asked.

He wriggled some more. "I don't think I should pass on the—the ravings of a girl who was mentally disturbed at the time," he protested. "She didn't know what she was saying; when she sobered up she probably didn't even remember coming to me. It's not fair to the person she named. Millicent herself would be the last one to want to—"

"Look, Steiner," I broke in, "we're not going to arrest anybody on some of Millicent's drunk talk. Which sister did she say she was afraid of?"

He swallowed and looked down at his dead cigar. All the charm, the supreme self-confidence, the magnetism that had held all those old gals spellbound in the temple had drained out of him and he looked plain wretched.

His voice was no more than a mumble when he finally said, "Jane. She told me Jane had already tried to kill her twice, once with a gun and once by running over her in a car. She said she knew—*she knew*—Jane wouldn't miss a third time."

I wondered how many thousands of women—shopgirls, housewives, stenographers, beauty-shop operators—had read about the fabulous Richards sisters and had envied them their beauty and their dough. And actually, the big place on Cedar Hill had housed no happiness at all, but only fear and jealousy, suspicion and hate. What had happened to the four girls? Could everything be blamed on the early loss of their parents? Was it only a case of too much money combined with a total lack of intelligent guidance? That would have been an easy answer were it not for the fact that I knew from what Olivia had told me that from the first the four girls had been given the best schooling available, by competent tutors, in private schools with excellent records for molding good citizens out of priviledged youngsters, teaching rich kids how to handle the responsibilities of great wealth. They'd even gone to State University, where they'd spent a year living the life of average undergraduates. ("It was a wonderful year," Olivia had said. "For the first time we were just four freshmen trying to make the grade on our own. I loved it.")

Yes, they'd had guidance, but only Olivia and Meredith had accepted it, and after Olivia and I broke up she'd thrown away all the values she'd built and had turned into something that the woman I'd loved wouldn't have had under the same roof. Why? A bad strain in the Richards blood? Aunt Harriet's evil influence? But who could call Aunt Harriet evil?

I sighed, deep down, and asked my next question. "How long has the plumbing at the beach place been on the fritz?"

He blinked in his surprise at the sudden switch. "Why, I don't know exactly," he said. "Three or four days. It's the original pump and I understand the caretaker couldn't find anybody who knew—"

"We heard about that," I cut in. "But if there wasn't any water, why book a picnic supper out there tonight?"

He shook his head. "That was called off yesterday," he said. "Everybody was told there'd be a temple service here tonight instead of the scheduled—well, the disciples"—he threw a jeering note into the word—"like to call them nature communions."

"Did Meredith know the picnic had been canceled?" I asked.

"Of course she did," he told me. "Naturally, she was the first one notified."

I caught Tim's glance and knew he was wondering the same thing I was: if Meredith had known there was to be no beach brawl, why had she packed the picnic basket and mixed the martinis?

Chapter Four

I.

Sunday mornings usually are my time to sleep in, but the day after Millicent Richards' death my eyes popped open the second that "Apollo mounted his golden seat," and refused to shut after that. It had been a restless night anyway, in spite of the fact that it was somewhere around one in the morning when I'd finally shut off the stereo, finished my long, pale nightcap and hit the sack.

It's been my proud boast that ordinarily I can leave my job problems at the front door of the apartment when I come home, and even if there are some business phone calls, which there always are, I can usually jot down a note and forget it until it's time to go on duty the next day. But this case wouldn't shake loose from me and perhaps that was understandable: I'd worked other homicides with which good friends of mine had been connected but never before had I investigated a case in which the only woman I'd loved deeply was involved up to here. And Millicent too: she might have been a pathological chippy but in spite of her sex morals or lack of them, Millicent had never been mean or selfish or bitchy in any way. True, Jane had accused her of messing around with her, Jane's, first love, but I'd have been willing to bet that whatever Millicent had done that had got Jane so sore, she'd done without the least intention of hurting Jane but simply because there was a man and, being Millicent, she'd made a pass at him.

When she'd let me know that a quickie behind the potted palm would be all to her liking, she'd never intended to steal something that belonged to Olivia. It was just that where men were concerned, Millicent had a blind spot: she never regarded these little adventures as anything but almost impersonal acts of physical release. (And why hadn't she been helped by psychiatry when she first got this way? Because Aunt Harriet termed all child psychiatrists quacks and, for that matter, could never have brought herself to admit this problem of Millicent's to any outsider, including priest or physician.)

So, as I was saying, this question of who killed madcap Millicent let me sleep only fitfully for a couple of hours and then brought me out of the sack at dawn. I got into a robe and slippers, yawning and cussing, and tried to be as quiet as a little mouse getting into the kitchen so I wouldn't wake up Henry. So, of course, this off-ox had to drop the percolator, which landed on the floor with a crash that sounded as though one wrestler had thrown another into a china cabinet. That brought Henry popping out and nothing

I could say could stop him from taking over, five-thirty ayem though it might be and as dearly as he loved his Sunday-morning sleep-ins.

"You go read papers," he ordered. "I'll fix shake-up breakfast. Won't be real breakfast but it will hold you for now."

So I shuffled out to the front door, still yawning, still cussing myself for my sudden loss of professional impersonality, and got the two bales of Sunday papers, the *News-Courier* and the *Telegram-Gazette.* (And whatever happened to the newspaper with only one name on its masthead: is a hyphen required by FCC regulations nowadays?)

The *News-Courier* had a modest first-page story on Millicent's death, well handled (at least from the family's standpoint), with only the term "died suddenly" and no implication of murder, just a hint of the possibility of suicide. The *Telegram-Gazette* said she "collapsed at the home of a friend while visiting his bachelor apartment at North Beach" and said a post-mortem had been ordered, but for the sensational *Telly-Gazette* this was practically a hush-up. Both papers hauled out their morgue files on the famous Richards quads, and while the yarns took up a lot of space, they dealt mostly with family history, carefully edited for possible libel. As a matter of fact, the *Telly-Gazette* gave more lines to Olivia's multiple-marriage merry-go-round than poor Millicent got, and the account of Meredith's social activities, along with her connection with Steiner's metaphysical nonsense, equaled the space given Millicent. About Jane, the only thing either paper could come up with was the undeniable fact that she was one of the quadruplets.

I found the sports section in a valiant effort to get my mind off the case and I was commiserating with myself over the race results when Henry called me to come get my "shake-up breakfast." This turned out to be a pitiful excuse for a meal, consisting of broiled grapefruit topped with cinnamon-sugar, a ham omelet (and I mean an omelet, not scrambled eggs), hot biscuits with Smoky Mountain wild blackberry preserves, and coffee, all cooked within what seemed to me to have been forty-five seconds flat.

When I turned down about the fifteenth biscuit for lack of space, Henry, who'd been hovering, was worried. "You look bad, Captain," he told me. "You better stay in bed all day, kill little bugs with annie bottics."

"Maybe I'll do just that," I told him, just to see what would happen.

He bit. He looked more worried than ever while he shook his head. "But if you lay abed all day, who's gonna find criminals which killed Miss Millicent, hey?" he asked me. "You think Mist' Tilson or Mist' Hart can find him quick like you can? Ho! They are fine detectives but not so good as you. Everybody depending on you to find Miss Millicent's murderer and what do you do, stay in bed all day?"

He sounded so accusing that I had to defend myself, no matter that this whole thing had started out as a gag. "Look, Henry," I said. "Nobody works on Sunday. Anything I have to do in the Richards case I can do better tomorrow."

"What if murderer runs away?" Henry asked.

"Nobody's going to run away," I said. "I almost wish somebody would. It would at least narrow down the field. And speaking of fields, that horse you gave me Friday ran next to last."

"Police captains shouldn't bet on horses, anyway," Henry said virtuously. "You know what I think, Captain?"

"No, what?"

"I think that old lady, Miss Harriet Richards, she is very bad woman."

This surprised me, first because Henry almost never offered an opinion about a case, and secondly, he had an Oriental's respect for old people that almost amounted to reverence. "Why do you say that?" I asked. "You've never met her, have you?"

"No," he admitted, "but when I was walking through gardens out there—they need plenty wood chips and bone meal on their roses, you betcha—I met the gardener. I started to tell him what was wrong with everything"—I could just imagine Henry doing it, too, and the gardener's reaction—"and he said to me, 'By Jesus' —excuse me, but he said this—'by Jesus, it's bad enough I gotta take orders from old'—he said *very* bad name—'who oughta be in prison if anybody knew what I know, so sharrup!' " Henry was pensively silent for a moment and then added, "Was very angry for some reason."

"So Miss Richards may be a hard one to work for," I said. "Does that mean she'd kill one of her nieces?"

"You should have heard gardener," Henry said stubbornly. "It was all right for him to say sharrup to me but he said the other like it was *important.*"

"I'll talk to him," I promised. "You didn't get his name, did you?"

"Oh, no. He was so disagreeable I walked away and found nice Miss Jane with her bonsai."

I took a sip of coffee and asked, "You got along fine with Miss Jane, didn't you?"

His round face beamed. "Is very nice young lady," he said. "Very friendly."

I thought to myself that that was probably one of the very few times Jane Richards had ever been described as friendly and I wondered again just how Henry had managed to establish a rapport with this strange woman so quickly. It wouldn't do any good to ask him; there hadn't been time for anything but one of those rare, inexplicable friendships-on-sight that neither he nor Jane could possibly explain.

"You know this bonsai," I said. "Does cyanic acid always play a big part in cultivating those dwarf trees?"

"Oh, no," he said. "I never never used anything like that when I had my trees back home. Is quicker for killing shoot or root you don't want but you gotta be careful you don't kill whole tree. Most bonsai teachers don't let you use acid. I never would if I was teaching anybody. I told Miss Jane so. She said she had this acid anyway so she—"

"She had this acid anyway?" I cut in.

He bobbed his head. "Oh, yes. Before she took up bonsai she was real gone—that's what she said—about collecting butterflies. She used acid to put butterflies to sleep so when she stopped butterflies and started bonsai she said wotta hell, might as well use up acid." He hunched his shoulders. "Take long time to use up even little bitty acid in bonsai. One touch mebbe once every two, three months."

So that acid possibly had sat on Jane's workbench a long time, first used to put butterflies to sleep (but why not old-fashioned chloroform?) and then for the dwarfed-tree culture. Until the time, three days before Millicent died, somebody had reached up and taken it down and later poured the deadly stuff into the martinis. Why at this time; why not before this? What had happened in Millicent's life to trigger the murder, if it was murder?

I gave up trying to dope it out and went back to my room to shower and shave and get dressed. By the time I came out into the living room again, it was quarter to eight of a Sunday morning when there was nobody available to talk to, nothing to do, to make the Millicent Richards picture a little clearer.

But yes, there was one place I could go, one person I could talk to. I remembered Olivia's caustic comment: *The Porthos bar opens at eight, even on Sundays, and dear Nels is usually well on his way by ten.*

I was a member of the Porthos, although I almost never went there except for lunch once in a blue moon when I happened to be taken hungry in the immediate vicinity. The Porthos was an expensive club and it had been a fine club in my father's day. It wasn't now and hadn't been since it had somehow turned into a refuge for wealthy ginheads and blue-blooded gamblers who sneered at the idea of anybody playing bridge for less than a nickel a point or a poker or gin game where a second-best player couldn't drop five thousand bucks at one sitting. The lights blazed all night in the card rooms and the bar closed only for the minimum length of time demanded by the lenient laws covering private clubs. The active membership included a high percentage of morning drinkers, so that eight-o'clock bar opening was more important than the cuisine, the living accommodations or the camaraderie.

I got my hat and went out back to tell Henry I was on my way. "If anything important comes up I'll be at the Porthos Club for the next hour or so," I told him. By the pained expression on his face I knew he'd heard of the club, so I added, "On business, for heaven's sake, and stop watching over me like a mother hen."

Which was not the way I usually snapped at Henry. On my way down to get the Rolls I blamed my outburst on lack of sleep and assured myself that Henry would understand and forgive me.

The Porthos was housed in a big granite-front building with impressive pillars and a bronze plaque bearing the club's crest beside the front door. The streets were deserted except for a few early church-goers, but when I went through the revolving door into the high-ceilinged lobby I heard sounds of activity coming from the card rooms to my left and the billiard room (where the crapshooters held forth) to my right. At the end of the long hall was the dining room—an acre of tables, five waiters and three customers, gloomy wretches who stared at their suspiciously tall glasses of tomato juice (Bloody Marys, every one) as though trying to summon enough courage to risk carrying them to their mouths.

Nels Manning wasn't in the dining room so I went downstairs to the bar, a paneled cavern with some fine heads—bighorn sheep, antelope and water buffalo—on the walls, three-liter steins on the shelves, two or three big Gay Nineties saloon nudes and a never-lifting haze of tobacco smoke. This place was fairly crowded and I said hello to two men I dimly recognized, but there was no sign of Nels. I wondered if Olivia's husband had pulled a fast one, and told myself no, he wasn't the kind who'd stray far from the things he had to cling to, no matter how much he might want to. That was one thing I'd learned about alcoholics since I'd come on the cops: they were 99 percent unreliable except in one area and this was their need to stay within the little world they built for themselves, the universe of booze that kept shrinking and shrinking in on them until finally they couldn't move except to find another drink.

This held true even more for the millionaire ginhead than for the skid-row bum. The bum had to at least hit the streets and panhandle for his next pint of smoke, but the wealthy drunk could sit still and have somebody bring his booze to him. Both types developed the same fear and suspicion of the unfamiliar world that could live without alcohol, but the skid-row zombie had to brave the terrors, goaded by a need greater than his panic, while the moneyed rumdum could huddle in his boozy security.

(*Our job is to investigate crimes, not to spout dormitory philosophy:* Burke's Law.)

I made my way to the long bar and nodded to the bartender, a sharp-eyed little man who looked like a retired bantamweight. "I'm suppose to meet Nels Manning," I lied. "Has he been here?"

"Not yet, Captain Burke." A dozen men stopped talking and looked at me. "Expect him any minute, though. He's past due."

He looked toward the door and grinned, as pleased as though he'd just won a bet. "That's him coming in right now, Captain."

Nels was picking his way through the crowd, responding to jeering references to his previous night's performance with a twitching smile but never taking his eyes off the bar, beyond which stood a row of beautiful bottles. I doubt he saw me until he reached the stick beside me and I said hello.

He replied absently, then gave me a double take before he managed to twist his trembling lips into something like a smile. "So early in the morning?" he mumbled. "Have a heart, will you?"

"Go ahead," I told him. "Take your time. No hurry."

His hollowed, bloodshot eyes were honestly grateful. "Thanks," he said, and turned to the bartender, clinging to the stick with both hands. "A double, Harry," he said. "Better make it a nervous glass. It's a black day."

The bartender looked at me and I shook my head. Harry pulled down a bottle of Monnet brandy, twice filled a hefty two-ounce jigger and dumped it into a tall highball glass, pushed it across the bar to Manning and stood back, his bright eyes watching Olivia's husband expectantly, in a mixture of derision and compassion.

I'd never been there but I knew that the last thing in the world a shaky drunk needs is somebody watching him deal with the first drink of the day, so I said to Harry, "I've changed my mind. Make me a sour, will you, please?"

I half turned away from Manning to watch the bartender mix the whiskey sour I didn't want, and I sensed rather than saw Olivia's husband make three or four moves toward his glass without picking it up. When Harry put my drink in front of me he looked at Nels and asked, "Think you can make it, Mr. Manning?"

Nels looked at his brandy with longing and disgust and then at his hands, locked on the bar rim to keep them from fluttering too obviously. After a while he shook his head. "No, I'm afraid not. Let's have the ski lift, my dear and glorious physician."

Harry reached under the bar and came up with a towel, snapped it open and handed it to Nels. The sick lush managed to get one end around his shoulders and clutch the other end in the same hand that grasped the glass. By pulling on the free end he got the drink up to his mouth, and although his teeth chattered against the rim, he was able to swallow a mouthful, then brace himself to fight the comeback that threatened to make all this a waste of time, after all.

It wasn't a pretty sight and what made it worse were the still visible traces of what must have once been quite a hunk of man. God knows I'm no moralist nor yet a WCTU supporter but when I looked at Manning and the others like him in that club bar—who seemed to regard this "ski lift" demonstration as a common thing—I was somehow glad that in his early days, when he was first starting to roll, F. X. Burke had turned down two chances to make big money fast, one with a distillers' combine and the other with a cozy little group of small loan companies.

Nels won his battle with his stomach and downed the rest of his brandy, set down the glass with a sigh of relief. Now he was a cinch to live through the next hour, at least, and what more could a hung-over gin-head ask?

"Another, Harry," he ordered, and looked at my untouched sour. "Come on, Captain, drink up. Good for you; takes the night poisons out of your system." He remembered Millicent and winced. "Bad word, poison, at a time like this, eh? Sorry."

Harry gave him his second drink and he picked this up with confidence, tipped me a salute and downed it. He was getting another refill when a short, stubby old character with a bald head fringed with gray, a red face and a glass in his hand came up to us, exuding good cheer and a breath that would have sent a mule to its knees. He stuck out his hand to me and when I took it he pumped it vigorously and dropped it. "Nice to see you, Amos," he told me. "Name's Ackerson, in case you've forgotten. Good friend of your father's. Thought the world of old F. X."

I could have said that as I remembered F. X. Burke, he'd stopped coming to the Porthos Club on account of just such articles as Ackerson, but I didn't. I murmured something and our newfound friend turned to Manning. "Damned shame about your sister-in-law," he said. "Heard about it last night on the TV news. Showed her picture. Fine-looking girl. Of course, all four of Jarvis Richards' set were pretty girls." He brayed a goatish laugh, peculiarly offensive coming from him and in this place. "Always suspected you of playin' the entry, Nels, when you married into that family, you lucky dog."

Manning's brandy had done its work fast and well. "Get out of here, Ackerson, before I forget you're a dirty old bore and let you have one." While Ackerson spluttered, Nels turned back to the bartender and said, "Bring a bottle into the lounge, will you? Maybe a man can have a drink there without being pestered."

Ackerson bared his false teeth in a snarl. "Go wherever you want to, Manning," he said, "but don't forget I'm holdin' your chit for three hundred dollars from last night's game."

Nels told Ackerson where to store his chit for safekeeping and led the way to a small lounge filled with easy chairs and low coffee tables on which magazines were scattered. I followed, mourning the sad times on which the Porthos Club had fallen when two half-drunk members could tangle at the bar on a Sunday morning without causing the least stir among the others, who were on their way to getting drunk and quarrelsome, too. Manning took a chair, still muttering, and swigged at his drink. Harry put a fresh bottle of Monnet and a bowl of ice on the table in front of him and went back to his stick. I held my sour in my hands and waited for Manning to get over his immediate peeve; a couple more drinks and he should be about ready to be made to talk.

He took those two drinks in as much time as it required for him to pour them and toss them off. When the second—his fifth of the day—went down the hatch I said, "How did Olivia's picture turn up in Gil Harris' beach shack?"

He'd had enough to be full of false self-assurance. He waved his hands, hunched his shoulders and shook his head, all too heartily. "How should I know? Olivia made it sound as though Harris and I were bosom buddies but we're not. I've tried to help him get work a couple of times and he tried to teach me how to use a surfboard but I— Have you ever tried to stand up on one of those damned things, Burke?"

"No, and if you weren't at least fairly close friends, why did he come out to Cedar Hill yesterday morning to get you to take Millicent off his hands?"

Another dramatic shrug, headshake and hand wave. "Don't ask me. I thought he had one hell of a nerve, to tell you the truth. I'd had a bad night, one of those goddam white nights I get every so often, and I'd just about gone off to sleep when Huston rapped on my door and told me Harris was there, asking to see me. I had half a mind to tell him to send the man away—I thought Gil was there to borrow money—but I finally dragged myself downstairs and told him I'd pick up Millicent as soon as I bathed and dressed and had some breakfast."

Which was a nice way of saying after he got enough drinks down to operate.

"What time did you start for North Beach to collect Millicent?" I asked.

He gave a short laugh and reached for the brandy bottle. "Hell, I never did start," he said as he poured. "I was just about to leave Cedar Hill when Olivia woke up and asked me where I was going. When I explained she—er—told me not to bother." He sipped his drink, peering at me over the rim of the glass to see how I took his explanation.

"You didn't know Millicent came back to Cedar Hill yesterday morning and ran out again with Meredith's lunch basket?" I asked after a pause.

He shook his head. "No. If I'd known she was there I might have persuaded her to stay. We always got along pretty well, Millicent and I." He looked down at the half-empty glass in his hand and made a grimace. "Two of a kind, I guess, where this stuff was concerned."

Now Nels had reached the stage between the shakes and the new day's intoxication where I might possibly get a couple of meaningful answers. I had to work fast; this wouldn't last long. I had to play rough, too, because working this the humane way would take too long and Manning would be over the line before I got what I wanted.

"How much time do you think you've got left as Olivia's husband?" I asked him. "How long before she turns you loose?"

He started to bluster but I cut him off. "Six months?" I asked. "Three? Less than that?"

He went to his brandy again, doggedly, as though the answer that would solve everything lay in that next swallow.

"What happens to you then?" I asked. "You're overdrawn on your allowance and from what Ackerson said you're in debt around and about. What are you going to do when Olivia ties the can to you, Manning?"

"She won't," he muttered. "In spite of everything, she still loves me." There wasn't even a shadow of conviction in his ragged voice.

"Oh, come on," I said. "Let's stop kidding ourselves, shall we? She divorced a couple of good men who weren't on the sauce so why would she keep you?"

He looked at me in helpless appeal, his square face haggard. "What do you want from me, Burke?" he asked. "Did you come here to—to humiliate me?"

"I don't get much kick out of humiliating people.

I came here to get some information—like what you and Gil Harris had cooking, for instance."

"Nothing," he said huskily. "I swear there wasn't anything."

I said an old Anglo-Saxon word. "Don't give me that. Let me tell you what I think. I think that even you could see the handwriting on the wall. You knew you didn't have very many more days left on the Olivia Richards gravy train so you—or maybe Gil Harris suggested the whole deal—you thought you'd try for a bigger get-lost settlement than Olivia was likely to give you out of the goodness of her heart. The two of you set up a frame. You supplied Gil with a photograph of your wife, complete with the same message she'd written on yours, just substituting the words "Darling Gil' for 'Darling Nels'—you must have been able to get your hands on those new photographs of hers you spoke about. The picture was intended to back up something a lot more convincing in case Olivia needed leaning on. The next step was to set a trap for Olivia so this stag-magazine photographer could snap her in some compromising position with his trick cameras with their cable releases. Then you'd have something to trade with Olivia for a fat settlement when it came time for her to tie the can to you. Even Olivia Richards wouldn't want a lot of messy countercharge evidence in her divorce suit, no matter how phony it was."

(Burke's Law: *The fact that a long reach misses 98 percent of the time is no reason the investigator shouldn't reach occasionally. Remember that 2 percent.*)

This was one time when the 2 percent came through. Manning's face went all to pieces and he reached for the brandy bottle again. "It was all Harris' idea," he whined. "I—well, he had something on me, something I did when I was drunk, and he kept asking for money to keep quiet. First it was ten dollars here and twenty there—loans, he called them—and then he began asking for more and more. I couldn't afford it but he made these threats. Finally he said I couldn't hang on as Olivia's husband much longer and we ought to make sure she didn't cut me off with nothing. The picture was his idea. He saw the one in my room and you know how easy Olivia's handwriting is to copy; I traced it on the one I gave Gil except for the salutation. Next he said I'd have to get Olivia to his place on some pretext, no matter what, and leave the rest to him. I don't know what he planned, because Olivia despised him, but he said he could handle it so there'd be plenty of evidence she'd be glad to pay big for."

The pieces started to fall into place now. "So when he came to Cedar Hill yesterday morning it was to tell you to get Olivia to collect Millicent?" I asked.

He nodded miserably. "Olivia could boss Millicent around most of the time when nobody else could make her listen," he said. "Yesterday morning, Gil said Millicent was at his place, falling-down drunk, and I should tell Olivia that she was sick, she needed her. Olivia was a cinch to go to North Beach alone—she wouldn't want me with her while I was going through my morning miseries—and he'd fix everything, just leave it to him."

"Did you tell Olivia?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No. No, I—I needed some time to get organized. The whole thing scared me, if you want to know, and I had to get a pick-me-up before I braved the Witch of Endor in her cave. Olivia is always most difficult before lunch." He swigged his brandy and went on. "So one drink led to another and the time slipped away, as it will. I found myself needing a fresh jug so I went downstairs to get one I'd hidden in the laundry room. While I was there I heard Millicent talking to Huston in the kitchen. I didn't want them to see me so I stayed in that damned laundry room for a long time, until she laughed and said something to Huston that sounded like 'Don't worry—this will fix everything,' and then she left. When Huston went out of the kitchen I slipped back up to my room and sat down with my jug to think it over."

"Did you notice what time this was?" I asked.

He shook his head again. "No, but it was later than I'd realized because Olivia was stirring in her room. I saw that Gil's plan had gone haywire somehow; Millicent wasn't at his place and I didn't know what else had gone wrong at his end so I didn't tell Olivia anything. We went out to lunch and on to the Yacht Club and—well, you know the rest."

He finished his glass and poured another. I'd got about everything I could hope for out of him and it had been quite a lot. His story explained Gil Harris' camera setup, Olivia's photo, Harris' visit to Cedar Hill. On the other hand, if Nels had been telling the truth (and I was almost sure he had—after his fashion) there were a lot of new questions raised.

I looked at the wreck across the table and decided there was one more question he could answer before all that brandy caught up with him.

"Was Millicent carrying your child, Manning?" I asked bluntly.

He stared down at the golden liquor in his "nervous glass" and his voice was dull and despairing. "I don't know, Burke," he said. "A drunk like me remembers things in the night and some of 'em are true and some of 'em are just liquor dreams. If I had to tell the truth about Millicent and me to save my soul from the fires of hell, I swear I couldn't honestly say whether we—we made love when I was drunk one night six months ago or whether it was just the booze telling me we did because I'd always wanted to."

That was when Harry, the bartender, came to the doorway of the lounge and said, "Call for you, Captain Burke. Do you want to take it in the bar or outside in the hall where you can hear yourself think?"

"In the hall," I told him, and left Nels Manning sitting there, still looking at his drink as though an answer to my last question would finally emerge from the brandy.

It was Henry on the phone and he was pretty excited, for Henry. "Lieutenant McLeod called from headquarters," he told me. "More big trouble at Richards house."

"What is it this time?"

"Is nice Miss Jane who likes bonsai. Lieutenant says somebody snucked up behind her in greenhouse shed and hit her over the head with hammer or something. Oh, Captain Burke, the lieutenant says she mebbe gonna die!"

2.

At Cedar Hill, I found McLeod, Hart and Tilson already there, along with the usual department photographers and fingerprint men.

"The girl's in Benson Memorial," George told me. "It doesn't look so good for her, Amos. Whoever hit her wanted to make sure she was dead; there must have been four or five heavy blows and her skull's fractured to hell and gone."

"What was the weapon?" I asked. "Henry said something about a hammer."

"No, it was a pair of hedge shears," he told me. "Andy's looking them over for prints now but what can you expect to get from a tool that's been handled as much as that one must have been?"

I looked around the cluttered lathe house. The clump of tiny trees which Henry had prescribed for the day before was still on the bench. Over by the windows, a fingerprint man was gingerly maneuvering the same pruning shears that Jane had snatched up in her rage when she'd thought Nels Manning had poisoned her old poodle.

Well, if nothing else, one thing was sure now: neither Nels Manning nor Gil Harris had hit Jane over the head because I'd been with Manning from the time he'd been able to navigate, and Harris was still in jail.

"When did it happen?" I asked McLeod.

"Sometime this morning but we're not sure when. Jane is the family's only early riser—except the old lady, that is—and when she didn't show up for breakfast at her usual time, Huston went up to her room to call her. Her bedroom door was open and she wasn't there. When Huston asked around, one of the maids said she'd seen Jane heading for this shed. Huston came down here and found her on the floor, breathing but that was about all."

"Where's Huston?" I asked.

"The old man was pretty well knocked out, as you can imagine. The squad-car men who answered the first call said the intern who came out with the ambulance was afraid he'd have a heart attack or something so he gave him a shot. He's up in his room."

"The rest of the family and staff?" I asked.

"All present and accounted for," Les Hart reported, "minus one. It seems Olivia made a flock of telephone calls late last night and then got in her car and hightailed it out of here, nobody knows where."

"Have you tried to trace the calls?"

"I did," Tim Tilson said. "Only three of them were long distance. Two of them were to numbers in Ellisburg, upstate. The third was to a number in College Park."

"State University." I nodded. "How about Alan Steiner; got around to him yet?"

"His phone didn't answer so we sent a couple of men around to his apartment, the temple and the place out at Lighthouse Point. Haven't heard from them yet." This from Les Hart.

I told Tim, "Contact the Ellisburg police and have them send somebody around to the place those two calls are listed under. Find out why Olivia was calling. Get hold of the chancellor of State University, also the campus police; see if they can run down her call to College Park. I suppose you put Olivia's car plates on an all-points?" All three men nodded.

"Do you have a guard on Huston?" I asked.

Les answered. "One of the squad-car team stuck right with him till he got his shot. Then I told Samlow to sit with the old boy till he came to again."

"How about Meredith?" I asked. "Is she with the old lady?"

"Unh-unh," George replied with a headshake. "She tried to get in her aunt's rooms but the nurse said the old gal didn't want to see her. She's in her own room, taking it hard. Les told me she seemed able to take her other sister's death easily enough but she's sure kicking and screaming over this thing that's happened to Jane."

I didn't say so aloud but I could see that it figured. Until Jane was attacked there had been the strong possibility that Millicent had committed suicide, but the odds against that theory were a hundred to one now. There could be only one plausible reason why Jane had been hit and that was the fact that she knew something about Millicent's death or the killer thought she did. Now Meredith knew her sister had been murdered and she was both ashamed of herself for thinking Millicent could take her own life and scared that she, the most logical victim from the standpoint of a murder-for-profit killer, might be next.

All this assumed, of course, that Meredith wasn't both Millicent's killer and the one who'd hit Jane over the head with those shears. Everybody seemed to agree that Meredith should have gone on the stage and this "kicking and screaming" George mentioned might be another histrionic demonstration.

As for Aunt Harriet barring Meredith from her room, that could be tagged another of the old lady's vagaries. Meredith herself had said that her aunt turned on first one and then another of the four sisters; the attack on Jane could have jarred Aunt Harriet into another switch.

Or Aunt Harriet could know something that made her fear Meredith. I remembered that her favorite chair was beside a window that overlooked the gardens. And the greenhouses. And the shed where Jane had been struck down.

What had Olivia been tracking down, playing detective? Not the would-be frame her husband and Gil had set up. My mention of that photograph at Harris' place might have raised some suspicions in her mind but the long-distance phone calls couldn't have had anything to do with the Manning-Harris partnership. State University was in College Park and the four sisters had spent a year at State. Alan Steiner had been an English instructor at State in 1948, about the time Olivia and her sisters spent that happy year at College Park. Steiner had been bounced out of State with everything hushed up for fear of a legislative investigation. How old was Millicent Richards' Caesarean scar: could anybody tell?

But Olivia had looked me in the eye and had told me flatly that Millicent had proved several times that Nature didn't intend that she be a mother. Olivia had been genuinely shocked to learn that Millicent was six months pregnant. Was it possible that Olivia honestly didn't *know* that Millicent had been delivered of a child by Caesarean section? Was it possible that Meredith or Jane didn't know, either? How could this be?

Well, there was one possible explanation. As a matter of fact, it was the only explanation that offered itself and it was pretty grim.

I must have heaved a sigh because Tim asked, "What's the matter, Captain? Is this case so mixed up with this latest thing that it's getting you down?"

"No," I said. "Trust the keen brain of your dauntless leader to expose the truth." Suddenly the alleged humor turned sour and I had to add, "But I'm afraid the truth will turn out to be something I'd rather not look at, close to."

I told George, "Get after those angles I mentioned. I'm going up and talk to dear old Aunt Harriet. I'll look in on Huston on the way. If you haven't already, put somebody outside Meredith's door and keep somebody with her if she starts wandering around."

I went into the big house that at one time was scheduled to be the scene of Amos Burke's marriage to Olivia Richards. I asked the plainclothesman on duty in the lower hall where Huston's room was (in all the time I'd been visiting Cedar Hill I knew only that it was somewhere upstairs) and made my way to the third floor, back, where the old butler had lived for lo, these thirty years or more. Ed Samlow was sitting in a chair by the one window in the little, slope-ceilinged room, reading a book with deep interest.

"Hey, Captain," he exclaimed when I walked in. "You ever read this? I just picked it up and—"

I shushed him with a finger to my lips and walked over to the side of the bed. Huston was snoring, his mouth open, a long lock of his iron-gray hair down over his forehead. Whoever had brought him here had unbuttoned his wing collar and taken off his shoes, which sat primly beside the narrow bed, before they'd thrown a light blanket over him. I stood looking down at him for a second, half envying him his drugged sleep. Poor old Huston; for these few minutes he was relieved of all the worries, all the doubts and fears and even terrors, that he must have lived with for so many years as butler to the Richards family.

I turned away from the bed and went to the bureau in a corner, pulled open the top drawers. Everything was old-maidish neat, the handkerchiefs stacked in precise piles, the underwear folded as though still in its showcase, the rolled black socks in even rows. I shut the top drawers and pulled out the long middle drawer. There lay Huston's stiff-bosomed shirts, dozens of them, arranged in careful lines.

I closed that drawer and opened the bottom drawer and when I pushed aside the pieces of heavy winter underwear I exposed the old butler's ultra-private, ultra-personal cache.

Behind me, Ed Samlow let out a low whistle. "Holy smoke," he breathed when he could speak. "Who'd ever have thought it?"

3.

From Huston's room I went down to the second floor and Aunt Harriet's apartment. There was a man stationed outside the door and he told me he'd heard what sounded like the old lady crying but neither the nurse nor Aunt Harriet had tried to leave the room.

I knocked and when nobody answered I knocked again and kept knocking, louder and louder. That finally brought Mrs. Keogh to the door. She opened it about an inch and peered at me through the crack with one disapproving eye.

"You can't bother my patient now," she told me. "I've sent for the doctor. Miss Richards is in a terrible state; I should think even you would have the kindness to leave her alone at a time like this."

"I'm sorry," I said politely, "but there are some things that can't wait, like finding a murderer. I'm coming in."

She tried to shut the door but I was half inside before she started to push and she gave up with a splatter of complaints about this being inexcusable, be sure the doctor would hear about this. I brushed past her and walked to the chair by the window where Aunt Harriet was sitting, her red, wet eyes watching me as though I were her doom approaching her. Which, in a sense, I guess I was.

"Do you want the nurse to hear what I've got to say?" I asked the old lady.

She shook her head. Her voice wasn't the old autocratic bark but it was still pretty firm, considering. "Please leave, Mrs. Keogh," she said, and when the woman in starched white started to argue, Aunt Harriet raised a withered hand. "No, no, I'll be all right. Captain Burke and I have some—family matters to talk over."

Keogh didn't like it but she finally left, after a few more tries at convincing Aunt Harriet that she should (a) order me out of the room instead of her or (b) let her stay in case Aunt Harriet had an attack.

"I'm sure Captain Burke had first-aid training when he was a rookie *policeman,*" the old gal said with a trace of her onetime venom. "If I have an attack, he can take care of me until you come. If I just fall over dead, as I've been praying I would these past few minutes, your being here wouldn't make any difference."

"Miss Richards, what a way to talk," the nurse cried, but when Aunt Harriet pointed an imperious finger at the door, Mrs. Keogh left.

"All right, Captain Burke," the old lady said when the door closed, "the prisoner pleads guilty—to so many things. What are you going to do with me now, arrest me, lock me up? I deserve the worst, you know."

I didn't answer. Instead I picked up a low rocking chair that was across the room and brought it close to the chair by the window so we could keep our voices low-keyed.

"Is Janey going to die?" she asked me when I settled myself. It was the first time I'd ever heard the oddball sister referred to as Janey.

"They don't know," I told her. "It looks pretty bad."

"If she does die I'm responsible, of course."

I nodded. "Yes, if you'd opened up to me when I was here yesterday Jane wouldn't be where she is," I agreed. "But you weren't the only one who lied or covered up things we should have been told. Jane was one, herself."

"She was always a secretive child," Aunt Harriet explained. "I think she got it from her mother; Jarvis was such an outgoing man." The tears began to leak from her eyes again. "What will I tell Jarvis when we meet in the Hereafter?" she asked. "He left his four babies in my care and see what I've done with their lives." She brought her handkerchief up to her face and blurted, "Why couldn't I have died instead of Jarvis? If he'd lived, everything would have been so different, so much better."

I let her weep awhile and when she got control of herself again I asked, "How long ago was it that Millicent had her baby?"

She wasn't surprised that I knew. She must have reasoned that the postmortem would show something like this. Her voice was a flat half-whisper. "She was a child, just sixteen. That man! He should have been—What punishment is bad enough for a grown man who'd take advantage of a child, especially one with Millicent's—failing?"

"This happened while she was at State?"

She nodded. "It was a dreadful mistake, sending the girls to that awful place, but Olivia and Meredith insisted—Janey, too. They said they needed a change from what they called their rarefied existence, and the people I consulted, people who should have known better, all agreed."

I could have told Aunt Harriet that what had happened to Millicent at State was bound to happen, no matter how protected she was, but of course I didn't.

"Alan Steiner was the man responsible?" I asked instead.

She started to go into her old role of denying everything, refusing to answer questions put to her by this *policeman,* but then she remembered what had happened because of just this attitude and she nodded again, reluctantly. "The blackguard claimed there were other men. He threatened to cause a scandal if he were prosecuted as he should have been, so we had to see him go scot-free, although he lost his position at the university, of course."

"Millicent's sisters never knew about any of this, did they?" When she shook her head I asked, "How in the world did you keep it from them?"

"Huston arranged it. You see, the—the violation happened the first week Millicent was at State. She failed her first semester—she was a poor scholar—so she was back home when she told us of her condition. The other three were still at school. We told the other girls that Millicent had been enrolled in a special school for—ah—difficult children while actually—"

"This school was in Ellisburg?" I broke in.

She nodded. "Yes. It's not in existence now so I can say that the people who ran the school would do almost anything for a fee. For instance, when Millicent was placed in a shelter for unwed mothers in Illinois under an assumed name, the letters she wrote were sent to Ellisburg and forwarded from there. The same with the letters Millicent's sisters wrote her in their innocence; they were sent to Ellisburg and forwarded to the hospital."

"But when she came home, how—"

"I think I know what you're going to ask, Captain. In one of her letters Millicent said she'd undergone an emergency appendectomy, so that when she came back the scar, although misplaced, caused no comment." She pursed her lips and added primly, "Not that any of the children were brought up to show themselves immodestly, even before their sisters."

I let that pass. "What happened to the baby?" I asked after the pause.

"It was spoken for by adoption before it was born," she said. "Millicent never saw it."

"The only heir to all that money," I murmured. "I wonder how he or she is making out right now."

"The question of inheritance didn't enter my mind," Aunt Harriet cried. "The girls were only sixteen; I expected them all to marry and have many children. Except poor, reckless Millicent; the doctors at the Illinois hospital told her it was doubtful that she could ever carry another child for more than a month or so."

"But Millicent fooled 'em," I said. When she nodded, her face pinched, I knew she'd been the one listening in when George McLeod gave me the PM report. Or at least one of several.

"When Alan Steiner popped up again and Meredith fell for him—"

"What could I do?" she broke in. "Certainly I tried to warn Meredith that Steiner was a rogue but she was over twenty-one, and executrix of the estate to boot. Of course she wouldn't listen to me. The one time I went to Steiner's so-called temple to tell him to leave Meredith alone—even beg him—he laughed at me. He knew all about the hospital in Illinois and he said that if I interfered he'd tell the whole world about Millicent's shame. I couldn't bear having that happen. I still hoped to tie the family back together again somehow and such an exposure would certainly send everything flying to pieces."

She hesitated and looked down at her hands in her lap.

"Besides," she whispered, in abject despair, "the one time I decided it would be worth any sacrifice to save Meredith from that man, Huston forbade me to speak out."

"Yes," I said quietly. "Now we come to Huston."

She kept her eyes on her hands as she said in a monotone, "The monster. The perverted, inhuman monster. May he burn eternally in hell. The same hell I'll burn in for not telling the world what he really was when I first found out he was corrupting my Millicent."

When I climbed the stairs to Huston's room again I felt sick and half-ashamed of myself for having the same sex as the creature who lay on the cot in the slant-ceilinged room on the third floor, back. In police work, a man reaches the point where he can listen to almost any story of sordid evil with a sort of compassionate resignation: this is what happens when some poor bastard's wires get crossed and it's too bad but you can't let it throw you; your job is to see that this certain criminal doesn't get away with it or that that one is stopped before he hurts his fellow humans. It's damned seldom that a case can be so bad that you find yourself hating the criminal, but I was pretty close to hating Huston when I climbed those stairs.

Aunt Harriet's confession doesn't need spreading out in detail. To make it as brief as possible, long ago, when Huston first came to Cedar Hill, even before the quads were born, Jarvis Richards' spinster sister, Harriet, had been "indiscreet" with the handsome young butler. They'd carried on this affair for years, even though Aunt Harriet said she'd tried to break it off many times. Every time her conscience reared its head, Huston either kissed it out of her or, when it was real demanding, threatened a block-busting scandal. And even as a young woman, Harriet Richards would rather walk through hell barefoot than have the Richards name besmirched by scandal.

Jarvis Richards should have got wind of what was going on and perhaps he would have if he hadn't been just a little better than plain simpleminded (this I gathered from what Harriet said of him and what I'd already heard about him). In any case, Jarvis and the quads' mother never caught wise up to the day they sailed off in their yacht to go bear hunting in Alaska, leaving the four sisters in sister Harriet's care, and never came back.

Even before the quads' parents died, Harriet said she saw disturbing signs of something wrong with Millicent. She didn't elaborate on what these signs portended but I could guess. Where most little girls would have been appalled by Huston's evil, Millicent's curse must have been working even then, awakened by this —yes, the word was monster.

"I'm sure he tried to corrupt Jane, too," the old lady had told me in that withered voice, "but she was stronger-minded than poor Millicent. She suffered some kind of traumatic shock when she was about ten and after that she withdrew further and further into herself. She never had a sweetheart and I blame Huston for that, too, even though he denied ever touching her."

And when Jane did come out of her shell enough to go for a man, Millicent moved in on her, I told myself as I listened to Aunt Harriet. *Or did Millicent really try to take Jane's man or was Jane just told that lie?*

The story went on its grisly course: Harriet watched Millicent become more and more corrupt until finally the girl was completely out of control, even Huston's.

"The older he grew, the wilder Millicent became and the more jealous Huston was of her," Aunt Harriet told me. "At times he had to claim a sudden illness and lock himself in his room to keep from making a scene in front of the other girls or people visiting Cedar Hill."

"The other sisters never knew?" I asked.

"I'm sure Jane did"—the old lady nodded—"but she never said a word. I've caught her looking at Huston and then at me as though she wanted to shout the truth, then smile her strange smile and look away. If only she had shouted the truth from the housetops, perhaps it would have saved Millicent and now her."

When Millicent landed in trouble at State, Harriet said, Huston went half crazy with rage before he managed to get back into his role and take care of the arrangements for her secret accouchement. And later, when Millicent persisted in getting into the same kind of trouble, it was Huston who helped the all-wise Nature that Olivia had spoken of to get Millicent "taken care of."

"And you, Captain Burke," the old girl told me. "When Huston discovered that the man Olivia was going to marry was planning to make law enforcement his life's work, that there'd be a policeman in the family, it frightened him. He was afraid you'd see through him, through the both of us, and ruin everything, and so he came to me and told me I had to block the marriage." She shook her tightly bunned head as though in wonder at her own perfidy. "So I did," she told me.

Why hadn't Olivia wanted to answer the phone when I called after our bust-up? Because Olivia never knew I called; Huston never told her I did and when Olivia would have called me, the old devil fed her a pack of lies about Millicent and me, lies that the poor lost soul, Millicent, backed up cheerfully. Why not? What difference did it make? What difference did anything make?

Aunt Harriet hadn't known of Millicent's last pregnancy, nor, apparently, had Huston until it was too late to be "taken care of" as the others had been.

"When I heard that over the phone," the old lady said, "I knew—*I knew*—what had happened. I knew Huston had been mad for a long time. That would be almost bound to send him over the edge into real violence."

She paused and then said in a voice so low I had to bend closer to hear, "I suppose I knew before that, though. You'll remember that when you first told me about Millicent, and Meredith said something about suicide, I said Millicent couldn't take her own life. I don't know what made me say that; actually I don't know why the poor child didn't end her terrible existtence a long time ago. I guess I must have said what I said because—because I knew it was murder and I wanted you to find us out."

She gave a long, tearing sigh and leaned back in her chair, her eyes closed. "Yes," she said, "Huston killed Millicent but I'd stood by and let him kill her soul over twenty years ago. I don't know how Huston managed it yesterday but he killed Millicent and he tried to kill Jane this morning and now I wish he'd walk in here and put an end to this sinful life, too."

I'd headed for Huston's room after that, but not before I told Mrs. Keogh to watch her patient like a hawk. If I couldn't make the old devil in the third-floor-back room talk, I was going to need Aunt Harriet bad.

4.

"He's been muttering and fluttering his eyelids, Captain," Ed Samlow said when I walked in. "Looks like the old goat's coming to."

"Wait outside," I said. "If you hear him screaming, come in and tear me off him."

He looked at me, startled, and no wonder; it was the first time he or anybody else except maybe George McLeod, when I was first started out to be a cop, had ever heard me hate a killer out loud.

"You kidding, Captain?" he asked me.

"Maybe," I said. "I'm not sure."

Samlow left and I walked over to the side of the bed to look down on Huston, kindly old family retainer, lecher, despoiler of children, poisoner, arch-fiend with a Jeeves mask. I thought to myself that given a smart lawyer and a couple of nobody's-to-blame-for-anything alienists, it was a better than even bet that Huston would beat the electric chair and be sent to some hospital for the criminally insane. He'd probably live forever, too, and someday some soft-headed psychiatrist would probably declare him recovered from all the aberrations that had once robbed him of his ability to distinguish between right and wrong. Then he would walk free to hang around some school playground until he spotted the kid he wanted to—

Hold it, Burke, I told myself. *Are you playing cop, judge, jury and even God in this case because he killed Millicent or because he broke things up between Olivia and you?*

Huston snorted, grunted and opened his eyes. I stood over him, glaring down at him, and he stared back, then shifted his eyes around, getting his bearings. He found out where he was, remembered what had happened and tried to sit up. "I'm sorry, Captain Burke," he said. "The young man on the ambulance gave me something to make me sleep and I—"

I pushed him back down on the cot. "Jane came to right after she got to the hospital," I told him. "She sent you her love, Huston."

He watched me for a full five seconds, trying to read my face. I mustn't have shown him a thing because he gave a weak, wavery smile and said, "Thank you for trying to make me feel better, Captain, but I saw her, remember. She's dead, isn't she?"

I shook my head slowly. "No, she isn't dead, Huston. Cyanic acid kills in a couple of seconds but a pair of pruning shears isn't quite so foolproof. You should have saved a dollop of cyanide out of the dose you fed Millicent, just in case you had to get rid of somebody else."

He watched me again for what seemed a long time. Then he said, "I don't understand, sir. Do you mean to say you think I—"

"I don't think, I know," I cut in. "I've talked to Miss Harriet and I've talked to everybody else who's lived in this house while you've been playing your little games, and it all adds up, Huston. You poisoned Millicent because you couldn't stand the thought of her bearing somebody else's child a second time, and when Jane said something or slipped somehow and told you she knew you stole her cyanide, you brained her with the shears."

He brought a trembling hand up to his face and held it over his eyes. "I don't understand," he said again, feebly this time.

He was going to be tough unless I broke him up and fast, before he had a chance to find out just how much I really knew and how much I knew but couldn't prove. Aunt Harriet had spoken of his jealous rages where Millicent was concerned, and because nobody ever promised me that police work wouldn't be a dirty business sometimes, I seized on that. While he lay there watching me, I told him that he wouldn't be in the bind he was in if he'd acted his age, if he hadn't tried to kid himself into thinking he could hold a girl like Millicent Richards under his spell forever, while he turned into an old, old fool with nothing to offer a sexpot like Millicent.

"No wonder she was out every night with a different man," I taunted. "What did you expect her to do, sit up here with you, looking at your dirty pictures, the ones you have in that bureau drawer over there? Millicent wanted men with something to them, Huston, men like Gil Harris and Alan Steiner and Nels Manning and—"

He bounced up into a sitting position, his face contorted and his hands held up in front of him, crooked into claws. "Not him!" he yelled in a strangled voice.

"She never did with Manning! Never! I told her I'd kill her if she let him touch her!"

"Sure," I said. "That's why you put the cyanide in Meredith's martinis, because you knew it was Manning's child she was carrying."

"It wasn't! It wasn't Manning's. That drunken— It was Steiner or Harris or somebody else. She didn't know whose it was but it wasn't Manning's."

"Of course it was Manning's," I insisted. "If it wasn't, why did you kill her?"

"Because—because I was tired of it, tired of the whole thing," he said, still in that choked voice. "She was getting worse and worse. She turned against me. She used to listen to me once—everything I said was law—but lately she was always half drunk and when I tried to—to make her do the things she used to do, she laughed at me. Once she spat at me. That was when she told me she'd rather make love to a toad than to me."

He sat there, his thin body humped, looking at the wall beyond the foot of the cot and not seeing it. "But then—then when she got in trouble again, she came to me and told me I had to get rid of it for her. Six months, and she laughed and said I could get rid of it; I'd done it plenty of times before. Or would I rather she had the brat and kept it here at Cedar Hill so I could see it every day to remind myself that she let everybody make love to her but me?"

I said, "So you poisoned her; that was one way to get rid of it, eh? How did you get her to drink the stuff, smelling the way it did?"

He didn't answer for quite a while and I was afraid I'd lost him, but after a long time he spoke in a rusty voice. "I got the cyanide from the lathe house and waited for a chance to use it on her. I thought everybody would think it was suicide. Everybody ought to have thought so, with her pregnant and the way she used to talk about killing herself when she was drunk." He swung his narrow face with its protuberant eyes around to me. "Why didn't you?" he asked. "Why did you insist on thinking it wasn't suicide?"

"I'm asking the questions," I told him. I didn't think it would serve any purpose to tell him that I was almost convinced it was suicide, myself, until Meredith made that crack about Olivia wanting to kill her and getting Millicent by mistake.

"Millicent kept in touch with me by a pay phone near Harris' place," Huston went on. "I thought that when she finally came home and Harriet gave her hell, that would be a logical time for Millicent to commit suicide. But then Steiner's secretary called yesterday morning to tell Meredith the picnic was off and right after that, before I could tell Meredith— She was going through her antics in the music room. I used to watch her sometimes. There's a window in the garage loft that gives you a view of the music room and sometimes I'd watch Meredith and—"

"Get back to your story," I told him.

"Yes, sir," he said instinctively, Huston the perfect butler again. "I remembered the lunch basket in the refrigerator and the martinis when Millicent phoned to ask if it was safe for her to sneak home. I said I'd got the medicine, stronger than anything we'd used before because she was so far gone, and I'd put it in Meredith's martinis; she could come to Cedar Hill, take the lunch basket and go back to Harris' place to drink the martinis. It would be a joke on him, seeing he probably was the one who—"

He broke off, scowling, thinking of Millicent and Gil together.

"What about Harriet's ride?" I asked, to prompt him.

He said, "She heard somehow that Millicent had been home. She was—I think she was afraid I was going to do something to Millicent. Or maybe not; maybe it was my imagination. Anyway, she asked me where Millicent had gone—to Harris' place? I didn't want her interfering so I said no, she'd said something about meeting Steiner at the old beach house. That's where she drove to. That's how she got sand on her shoes, prowling around the beach house, trying to get inside the fence they have out there, while Millicent was drinking her last drink at Gil Harris' shack."

"Jane saw you take the cyanide?" I asked.

"Jane— I should have arranged an accident for that little bitch a long time ago," Huston growled. "The first time I tried to—but never mind. No, she didn't see me take the cyanide. She met me in the back hall early this morning—I think she was waiting for me—and she told me she knew I killed Millicent and if it took the rest of her life, she was going to prove it." He shook his head. "You never could tell about Jane. Maybe she had ways—" He paused for a moment and then said, "I couldn't take any chances. I went down there to the lathe house and walked up behind her in my stocking feet with the pruning shears in my hand. She heard me and turned around and saw me but it was too late."

"You didn't by any chance do anything to Olivia, did you?" I asked.

"No. I heard her calling Ellisburg and College Park—I listened in, of course—but I wasn't worried about her. The people who covered up Millicent's whereabouts when she was in the hospital are gone from there now, and as for the college, who was going to remember something that happened fifteen or sixteen years ago, especially when it was hushed up at the time?"

"You listened in on Olivia's phone calls, eh?" I asked. "You must have done a lot of listening in over the years, Huston. That and dropping a word here and there where it could do the most harm. Setting Olivia against Meredith, Jane against Millicent, getting Meredith to believe her sisters wanted to kill her to get the money she controlled. You even had Millicent thinking that Jane tried to kill her twice. What was the idea of that? In case she recovered from the poison, were you going to point the finger at Jane?"

"No, it was—well, Millicent was getting too fond of Jane and I was afraid Jane would turn her against me even worse than she was. One day Jane backed her car out of the garage without looking and grazed Millicent. Another time Jane was shooting rats by the stables and a ricochet hit the house near Millicent's window. Millicent was drinking, so it was easy to make her think Jane was trying to kill her."

I tried to think of something else to ask him, seeing that I had him going, but I was tired and nauseated and I wanted to be rid of the sight of this piece of filth.

"OK," I said. "Get your shoes on and button up your gates-ajar collar before we cuff you and take you downtown."

He swung his legs around and put his feet on the floor, wriggled his toes in the plain black socks. Suddenly he darted a look up at me and grinned.

"You know, don't you, that I'm going to deny saying a word of this?" he asked. "And if you think Harriet Richards will get on the witness stand and tell the world what a degenerate bunch the Richards family is, you're crazy."

"You keep forgetting you didn't kill Jane," I told him. "You said yourself that she saw you before you hit her."

"She'll die," he said with supreme confidence. "I know she'll die."

"You'd better pray that she doesn't," I said. "Because if she does and you go free for lack of her evidence, I promise you I'll hound you every living minute. I'll make you sweat until you'll wish the gas chamber had made it quick, instead of hour by hour, minute by minute, second by second."

I took whatever satisfaction I could from the look in his eyes that told me he knew I meant what I said.

5.

Jane lived, of course. It was touch and go for a long time but she pulled through finally and now she's OK except for a slight thickness of speech which she calls her goddam brain-damage brogue. She eventually married Charles Overing, the man she and Millicent quarreled over that time (of course, Huston had staged the whole thing with his lies), and of all the Richards quads she's the happiest of the lot today. Damned if she didn't pop two legitimate heirs to the Richards loot, twin boys and at the age of thirty-five!

Aunt Harriet died suddenly of a heart attack while Huston was still awaiting trial. I thought it was just as well; that way she didn't have to go through the ordeal of testifying to her own dishonor. That was just before Huston abruptly changed his plea to guilty by reason of insanity and found the smart alienists I'd predicted would convince a judge he belonged in a hospital for the criminally insane instead of in the electric chair. I'm keeping tabs on him. If he ever gets out I'll be waiting at the gate for him and I'll never stop leaning on him, even if it costs me my badge.

Meredith quit her metaphysical kick, shucked Steiner and his gang and went in for child welfare, where she's doing a lot more good with her money than she did by keeping Alan Steiner in priestly vestments.

Olivia? Well, believe it or not, Olivia still has Nels Manning, even though she found out all about the frame-up Nels and Gil Harris planned. If Aunt Harriet ever told her that Huston scuttled our romance, she never showed any sign of it. I wasn't at Cedar Hill when Olivia came back from her amateur detective work in Ellisburg and College Park, looking for information about Millicent that she couldn't find, so I haven't seen her since that Saturday afternoon in the library of the big house.

Still love her? Don't be silly. But sometimes I wonder why such a beautiful woman with such a potential as a wife and mother should be wasted on Nels Manning, and I think of how much happier both of us would be if only—and then I tell myself to shut up and tend to my business of being a cop.

And that's about the story of who killed madcap Millicent Richards. Oh, yes, the Larkin woman, Harris' neighbor, couldn't identify either Manning or Steiner from the pictures, so that angle tapped out, as so many angles do in police work. And when Henry thought Aunt Harriet was the one the old gardener meant when he griped about the old deleted who should be in jail, his weakness in English obscenities tripped him up. Later, when he told me the word he hadn't said out loud that Sunday morning, I found it could apply only to a man, never a woman; the gardener had meant Huston, of course.

And perhaps this final word is inevitable. We were at headquarters, talking over the case before we wrapped it up and put it away forever—George, Les, Tim and I—when Tim Tilson suddenly snapped his fingers.

"Hey, Captain," he crowed. "I just realized it. You know what?"

"Timothy," Les Hart said in a low, deadly voice, "if you're about to make any crack that this finally is the case where the butler really dunnit, I'll slug you."

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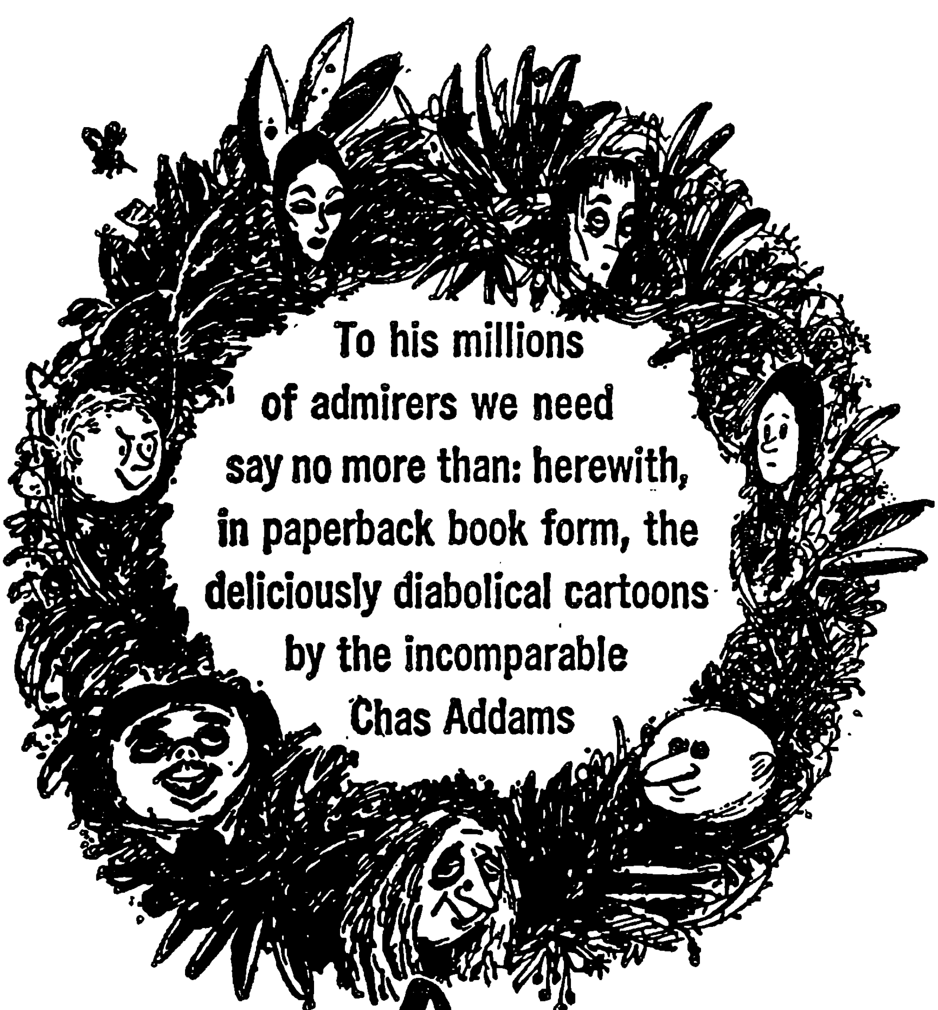

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WHO KILLED MADCAP MILLICENT?

“Millicent came down here Thursday evening. Saturday noon she turns up dead. What happened in between?”

The handsome, tanned beach bum stared down at the white knuckles of his clasped hands. “We did this and that,” he said vaguely. “She had a case of booze in the car with her and she got smashed right off. Then, later on, she poured herself a martini out of that Thermos over there. And then ...then...she just curled over and made a little noise and fell down on the floor.”

I leaned over and sniffed the stopper of the Thermos. The odor of almonds was strong. Cyanide!

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